

APPROPRIATING THE REAL:
MYTH IN IRIS MURDOCH'S FICTION

By

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This study is dedicated to examining how Murdoch's concept of myth functions in her novels. In her aesthetics and philosophical works she has criticized the solipsistic concerns of the modern novel, arguing in particular with the existentialist notion of freedom which dramatizes the personal will in conflict with the universe. For Murdoch, freedom depends on respecting the autonomy of others and recognizing "their absurd irreducible uniqueness." She has used the term contingency to suggest that reality is incomplete and inexplicable, and thus the novelist should attempt to present his fictional worlds in a similar way, resisting the temptation to console the reader by portraying a falsely ordered reality. Though Murdoch applies this term to reality in general, she emphasizes the importance of viewing others as real, proposing that the novelist should

create contingent characters who reflect the complexities of the human personality.

My reading of Murdoch's myths focuses on how her characters appropriate the otherness of the world and how the mythical framework of her novels recapitulates this appropriation, emphasizing the self-centered subjectivity which denies the reality of anything other than the self. In this way the characters attempt to define, control or unify their worlds, fending off the contingent possibilities that could potentially disturb their ordered existence. Although myth remains the central focus of the three chapters, my theoretical approach changes to accommodate different ways of applying the term to Murdoch's fiction. In the first chapter I show how the language of love, evident in letter-writing, is used to defer contingency through an effort to find meaningfulness and truth in the other. I show how letters reveal myth-making in five of the novels: Under the Net, A Fairly Honorable Defeat, An Accidental Man, The Black Prince, and The Sea, The Sea. The second chapter, a discussion of The Unicorn, The Bell, and A Severed Head, examines the way in which the spiritualized image of woman takes on a transcendent value to other characters. In the final chapter I assert that in The Good Apprentice death as trope produces a variety of ghosts whose otherness gives significance to the lives of the characters. Further, I show how this notion reveals an underlying myth in The Good Apprentice and in the novel in general.

INTRODUCTION
EXCLUDING OTHERS: THE SOLIPSISTIC MYTH

Iris Murdoch's fiction attracts critical attention of two extremes. She vexes those who find her novels to be far too reliant on nineteenth-century realism, admonishing her for her refusal to adopt a modernist or post-modernist sensibility. Harold Bloom, for example, is none too kind in his comments on narration in The Good Apprentice:

Admirers of Murdoch are fond of defending such authorial interpolations by citing their prevalence in the nineteenth-century novel. It is certainly true that George Eliot is never more impressive than in such interventions, and Murdoch is recognizably in Eliot's explicitly moral tradition. Unfortunately, what worked sublimely for Eliot cannot work so well for Murdoch, despite her engaging refusal to be self-conscious about her belatedness. (4-5)

Lorna Sage finds weakness in Murdoch's failure to employ self-consciousness in her fiction: "The 'moral greed' she awakens and feeds depends for its very existence on not [her emphasis] querying the author's nature or status--each new novel is unsatisfying, to its author and its readers, and addictive because it's unsatisfying" (74).

Yet Murdoch, at the other end, has her advocates who defend her against such judgments. Both Peter Conradi and Elizabeth Dipple do a fine job of arguing that critics have overlooked the apparent self-reflexivity in Murdoch's

fiction. In response to those who have criticized her fiction for its adherence to conventional realism, Dipple argues that

Murdoch's novels continue an unruffled demonstration of what fiction can actually do now as opposed to how it functioned in the past, how it can be said to operate, and what its limitations and necessary ironies are. This quiet self-consciousness works at odds with her stress on external matters like plot and character, and must not be underestimated as one of the primary sources of the reader's anxieties. (189)

In his seminal work Iris Murdoch: The Saint And The Artist Peter Conradi brings to task a variety of criticism directed at Murdoch's fiction. Clearly he feels that she has been done a disservice by those who have failed to recognize her as an important contemporary novelist. In one example, he finds criticism which uses her early theoretical works as a yardstick against which to measure her fiction, "too absolute and pious" (21).

My critical stance falls closer to that of these latter critics; like them, I feel Murdoch has been slighted by those who, referring to her abundant commentaries on the craft of fiction and her philosophical treatises, have reduced their vision to a one-dimensional scrutiny based solely on the author's intentions. Further, those who consider her recalcitrant in her allegiance to mimetic realism overlook characteristics of her fiction which serve to unsettle her fictional frameworks. In some of her novels, she parodies certain conventions of the genre, pointing to the artificiality of the novel's form. She is

fond of using the Gothic mode to create hyper-symbolic worlds, highlighting the mythical entrapment of her characters. The Unicorn, The Time of the Angels and The Sea, The Sea use Gothic elements to form their uncanny, unreal worlds. The Black Prince has received praise for its self-conscious reflection of the artist's role, as voiced by Arnold Baffin, the book's narrator. According to Richard Todd, the novel "challenges its own text and reliability and speculates on fictionality" and "flaunts the issue of solipsism" ("Postmodernism" 114-15). Yet in other novels Murdoch uses an egocentric, male narrator to achieve a similar effect--that of foregrounding the narrow, solipsistic world view of these characters. A World Child and A Severed Head use similar narrators to take us into the psyche's dark and unsavory depths; centered within the consciousness of a central ego, they reveal what a tenuous hold we have on what is real, suggesting that our lives are mere dramas that we continually invent to serve ourselves.

In addition, it seems to me that many critics overlook Murdoch's rather droll sense of humor that appears in the most unexpected scenes, having the effect of displacing the reader's expectations. In some of these scenes the humor arises not only from the element of surprise but from the uncanny nature of the incidents. Finally, the reality of Murdoch's characters is frequently disturbed by paranormal events which give her fiction a hyper-real quality--what Conradi refers to as "magical realism" and Robert Scholes

calls "fabulation." Within the bourgeois settings of some of her recent novels, supernatural occurrences not only put into question the perceptions of her characters, but parody the human tendency to mythologize the inexplicable. In Nuns and Soldiers, for example, Anne Cavidge experiences bleeding from the hands, emulating the crucifixion of Christ. It is not my purpose here to argue for a postmodern aesthetics in Murdoch's fiction, but simply to suggest that our methodology can, if we let it, tie our critical vision to our own expectations.

Many of Murdoch's critics depend, to some degree, on her philosophical and theoretical works to unravel her intricate fictional worlds. This approach is enlightening and useful but can also lead to a monocular view, inhibiting our potential for discovering the unexpected in the individual novels. In this study I too depend on such references but attempt to reach a compromise between relating her work to her theories and looking at her novels as autonomous. In Murdoch's fiction, patterns repeat themselves, and over the span of some thirty-odd years during which she has been writing, some of the same concerns reappear, albeit in different guises. In this study, dedicated to examining how Murdoch's concept of myth functions in her novels, her aesthetics and philosophical works have been useful in understanding some of the influences and concerns which have found their way into her fiction.

There are discrepancies between Murdoch's aesthetics and her fiction, but she acknowledges this problem, attributing these incongruities to the difficulties of the novelist's task in general. I am referring here to Murdoch's conception of the artist's responsibility, particularly the novelist's. Like Plato, she recognizes the tendency of the artist to become engulfed in his fantasy world, and she distrusts the one who presents his fantasies in the form of illusion (Fire 40). Many of her novels focus on artists trapped in such a world. But she differs with Plato in her belief that the artist can, through the imagination, transcend fantasy which is "the enemy of art and the imagination" (Sovereignty 52). In The Fire and the Sun she explains her opposition to Plato's view:

Good art, thought of as symbolic force rather than statement, provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value, a steady visible enduring higher good, and perhaps provides for many people in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest experience of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention. Art which we love can seem holy and attending to it can be like praying. Our relation to such art though 'probably never' entirely true is markedly unselfish. (76-7)

Attributing a moral significance to the artist's role, Murdoch claims that the essence of art and morals is the same: "The essence of both is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality" (Sovereignty 51).

She uses the term fantasy to describe the imaginative exclusion of others from one's reality. Others become dream objects whose freedom is restricted by the power of the fantasist. The artist, immersed in fantasy, ignores reality, creating a world which conforms to his self-ordained illusions. Instead, the artist should give the world of art "an independence and uniqueness which is essentially the same as that conferred upon, or rather discovered in, another human being whom we love" (Sovereignty 54-5).

In her early critiques of modernism, Murdoch criticizes the lack of independence in the characterization of twentieth-century novels. She emphasizes the need for more naturalistic characters like those in nineteenth-century novels "with real various individuals struggling in society" ("Against" 18). She criticizes the "neurotic modern novel" (Wolfe 26) for its lack of concern with the real world outside the self-conscious concerns of the artist. While the nineteenth-century novel succumbs to certain conventions, this tendency is "less deadly" than the solipsistic concerns of the modern novel (Sovereignty 53). She has argued, for example, with the existentialist notion of freedom which overemphasizes the personal will in conflict with the universe. True freedom, for Murdoch, must be achieved by respecting the freedom of others, which requires self-discipline. In Sartre: Romantic Rationalist she finds Sartre's weakness as a novelist to lie in his

failure to present "the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and of their relations with each other" (75).

Elizabeth Dipple sees a distinction between Murdoch's brand of realism and the nineteenth-century realist tradition. Murdoch, she claims, has developed a "radical idea of realism" which requires on the artist's part a "commitment to look clearly." To attain this clear perception, Murdoch suggests that the artist must resist the temptation to console the reader by portraying a falsely ordered reality. He should not succumb to the "consolations of form" but his representation of reality should resist fantasy while showing "a respect for the contingent" ("Against" 20). Numerous critics have pondered Murdoch's notion of contingency as an important criterion for the novel, but perhaps the best explanation of her concept of the term comes from her own work. She emphasizes, for example, the incompleteness of the world, its inexplicability, claiming that art should concern itself with "whatever is contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly still to be explained" ("Sublime" 51). Though Murdoch applies this term to reality in general, she emphasizes the importance of viewing others as real, and thus believes that the novelist should create contingent characters who reflect "the real impenetrable human person" ("Against" 20).

Murdoch's concept of myth derives, to a large extent, from these early critiques of modernism, particularly that

of the existential hero whose monomanical preoccupation with his own subjective experience leads him to appropriate others as a part of his ongoing delusion. Richard Wasson describes this type: "To this man the only thing that matters is his own consciousness; the world, its objects and people have no reality as separate, contingent beings, but exist only as symbols in his internal drama" (463). This type of character frequently appears in Murdoch's fiction as a selfish power-monger whose personal drama inevitably brings harm to others. My reading of Murdoch's myths focuses on how her characters appropriate the otherness of the world and how the mythical framework of her novels recapitulates this appropriation, emphasizing the self-centered subjectivity which denies the reality of anything other than the self. In this way the characters attempt to define, control or unify their worlds, fending off the contingent possibilities that could potentially disturb their ordered existence.

Although myth remains the central focus of the three chapters, my theoretical approach changes to accommodate different ways of applying the term. In the first chapter, I show how the language of love, evident in letter-writing, is used to defer contingency through an effort to find meaningfulness and truth in the other. I analyze the mythical nature of letters in five of the novels: Under the Net, A Fairly Honorable Defeat, An Accidental Man, The Black Prince, and The Sea, The Sea. In Under the Net the sending

and receiving of letters reinforces the book's preoccupation with the inherent deceptions of language. In this first novel Murdoch establishes the importance of letters as a literary device that she will frequently use to reveal her characters' abundant myths. In the other four novels, written during the 1970's, Murdoch relies on letters not only to reveal her characters' fantasies about reality, but to motivate much of the plot. Although Murdoch frequently uses letters to support her novels' mythical frameworks, in these novels letters become a substantial supplement to the developing narratives. My analysis is not concerned with chronologically placing these novels in Murdoch's canon, but it is of interest that during this period she utilizes letters to fuel the love entanglements.

The second chapter, a discussion of The Unicorn, The Bell, and A Severed Head, examines the way in which the spiritualized image of woman takes on a transcendent value to other characters. In the first two books, women are the center of the allegorical structure, indicating their entrapment within a power system. A Severed Head differs from these in its employment of a male narrator, but it finds kinship with them in its self-conscious mythification of women through this character's point of view.

In the final chapter I assert that in The Good Apprentice death as trope produces a variety of ghosts whose otherness gives significance to the lives of the characters.

Further, I show how this notion reveals an underlying death-myth in The Good Apprentice and in the novel in general.

CHAPTER ONE LOVE LETTERS

Iris Murdoch's characters often define their reality through the repetition of myths inherent in the mechanics of language. Her novels describe human thought and behavior as mechanical while language entraps her characters, compelling them to repeat patterns of behavior which are harmful to themselves as well as others. The pattern might be the construction of an ill-conceived fantasy, which the character uses for his egotistic purposes, or he may simply be reciting (and living) the culturally given language of morality and myth. In any case, his actions arise from language's iterability: the machine fosters a variety of behavioral codes, traps which keep the character oblivious to reality. Murdoch's notion of reality centers, to a large extent, on her concept of love, as evident in her novels' preoccupation with the characters' usually vain efforts to love one another. Through the sending and receiving of love letters, the encoded nature of language establishes and perpetuates a love-myth, constituting a denial of reality in Murdoch's schema.

When the fantasist in Murdoch's novels uses letters to establish and perpetuate a false image of the loved one or to control another, he fails to recognize the otherness of

that person or her reality. In "Against Dryness" Murdoch proposes that characters should be real, claiming that "Real people are destructive of myth, contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for imagination" (20). Murdoch's notion of what constitutes real people depends on giving characters a certain depth. She refers, for example, to the "real impenetrable" nature of the human personality and the "opacity of persons" (20). Murdoch's novels suggest that the human personality is subject to certain contingencies which complicate our efforts to give meaning to human behavior and events. These contingencies vary in nature, but have in common the unknowable, unpredictable quality of human consciousness.

It is not surprising, then, that Murdoch's novels depict characters who are deluded by the myth of the other. Further, her plots unravel these myths as characters show themselves to be less predictable than the fantasist would imagine. This unpredictability constitutes a hidden contingency which the fantasist ignores in the fabrication of his fictional other. While the contingent nature of the loved one is absent in the language of the love myth, it is present in real characters whose use of language disrupts the fantasy. Murdoch suggests that since language is the creation of human beings, it comprises not only their myths but their contingent nature as well.

In The Sovereignty of Good Murdoch explains that human love and art are evidence of a transcendent principle of

good, noting, however, the tendency for human love to be "profoundly possessive" and "too mechanical" (65). Her novels reveal this same cynicism, evident in the comic as well as tragic escapades of her aspiring lovers. The love letter in Murdoch's fiction motivates and complicates the love entanglements, frequently embroiling the letter-writer in unpleasant if not tragic circumstances.

Frequently, the letter operates to console the sender, by encompassing him in a love-fantasy or functioning as a defense to keep out unwanted affection. Love letters show the language of love at its worst, commenting on humans as compulsive writers who formulate fictions about themselves and live as if the fictions were true. Frequently, letters pursue an ideal--embodied in the beloved--or conversely, create a barrier between the writer and a threatening intruder. The love letter creates romance where there is none and fires the embers of romances which are based on vanity and self-interest. While the letter motivates and feeds romance, it seldom produces the response that the writer intends. The loved one may respond in a desireable way--continuing the drama at least temporarily--but eventually the letter comes back mechanically, wrecking lives and inviting accidents which might have been avoided. As the machine operates to give form to an erstwhile chaotic universe, letters attempt to restrain the contingent nature of existence by imposing order on a random world. Paradoxically, however, once the machine of language is set

going, it exacts a kind of karmic retribution insuring that the perpetrator reaps the language she sows. Contingency, then, is inherent in the operation of language and has the effect of demythologizing it.

In "The Sublime And The Good" Murdoch explains how her notion of freedom relates to love: "Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible work of imaginative understanding, of two irreducibly dissimilar individuals. "Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness" (52). Murdoch's novels have a great deal to do with attaining such freedom through the experience of loving another. In "Against Dryness" Murdoch posits that one can attain "degrees of freedom" in the world while in her novels we see that freedom, to any degree, eludes most of her characters. Ann Byatt claims that "All Miss Murdoch's novels can in an important sense be seen as studies of the 'degrees of freedom' available to individuals . . ." (11). William Slaymaker has suggested a "gradual change" in Murdoch's attitude toward freedom, claiming that in the novels of the 1970's attaining freedom becomes "not a matter of degree but an unrealizable dream" (173). In this chapter, I will examine five of Murdoch's novels from the 70's along with her first novel Under the Net. This novel presages the later ones' use of letters as a literary device to establish Murdoch's fantasy myths. Although this chapter is not meant to be a chronological study of Murdoch's books,

it is to some degree an analysis of how her dispensation of freedom varies in the five novels as evident in the characters' sending and receiving of letters.

Under the Net

"The whole language is a machine for making falsehoods" (60).

Under the Net contemplates the inadequacy of language as a method of discerning reality. Metaphorically, Murdoch uses the net to represent theories which Jake, a writer, attempts to get "under" in order to find the essence of reality. Murdoch has said that she was thinking of Wittgenstein's net of discourse when she wrote the book and in an interview with Frank Kermode explains that the novel presents "the problem of how far conceptualizing and theorizing, which from one point of view are absolutely essential, in fact divide you from the thing which is the object of theoretical attention" (115). In Under the Net Jake's pursuit of reality is inhibited by language, the net which he uses to trap truth, and which paradoxically traps him. When the net is used to trap meaning, it ensnares the one who wields it--being trapped goes along with the territory of trapping. The plot develops the philosophical metaphor of the net as the characters attempt to capture the possessions of others. Kidnapping, stealing, illegal entry, eavesdropping and plagiarism make up the comical escapades of the novel—netting activities primarily perpetrated by Jake, the narrator. All of these activities describe,

metaphorically, the mimetic nature of language. Acts of thievery are acts of copying: the mechanical net endlessly repeats itself by replicating the myths that are inherent in the language system.

While Jake believes that such efforts will reveal the mystery of reality, in fact, he is merely caught up in the mimetic production of language, a situation which is evident in his desire to copy the ideas of others or to simply repeat patterns of behavior. The operation of the tautological net is also evident in the postal network which gives impetus to much of the plot. The sending and receiving of messages show how Jake is seduced and controlled by the powerful influence of the language of the other, particularly the language of love.

Jake's eager response to the love message leads him in pursuit of a former girlfriend, Anna, a chase around which the entire novel revolves. In his first encounter with her at the theatre, letters are established as seductive messages prompting his pursuit. Trying to reestablish a bond between them, Jake brings up the subject of letter writing. First he asks to see her again, but she responds uninterestedly, "If I need you I'll call for you" (43). He then attempts to elicit a more definite response: "'May I write you?' I asked. In my experience women who have any interest at all in keeping a hand on you will rarely refuse this. It binds without compromising. 'I don't mind,' she said. 'A letter to the theatre finds me'" (43).

With this request Jake feels that he can discover Anna's feelings toward him while reestablishing a relationship with her; the language of love letters holds some special power that will bind her to him. Jake believes that by writing letters, he can seduce the loved one. He believes, therefore, that he has some control of language, and thereby control of the beloved. It is soon obvious, however, that the opposite is true: Anna and language control him, as is evident in her instructions as they part company, "...don't come back here unless I summon you" (44). This comment marks the beginning of a series of summonses to which Jake eagerly responds. In the first one she summons him to the theatre where he finds a letter announcing her departure, but leaving no clues as to her destination. With her disappearance, she takes on the attraction of the elusive love-object. This note prompts Jake's search for Anna, which traverses London and even takes him to Paris at one point, a trip inspired by a telegram from his former girlfriend Madge. Hoping to find Anna in Paris, Jake responds to this love message as if it held some clue to the whereabouts of the elusive other. In this way, he believes that language can unveil Anna's mystery.

In a parallel pursuit, Jake tries to uncover the whereabouts of Hugo Belfounder, a former friend whose theories Jake has plagiarized in a book entitled The Silencer. Jake regards Hugo as a god-figure, referring to him as his "destiny"; his pursuit of him is a pursuit of

truth. In short, Jake wants to discover the whereabouts of these two characters to uncover their separate mysteries. Jake compounds the mystery, however, when he mistakenly decides that Hugo has fallen in love with Anna. In actuality, Anna loves Hugo, while he loves her sister Sadie. Fearing that to find Hugo is to find Anna, Jake heightens the separate mysteries of the two while exaggerating the importance of his desperate pursuit.

Hugo, however, does not send alluring messages as does Anna. As Jake explains: "Hugo is not a great hand at letter-writing and finds it very hard to express himself on paper at all" (67). Hugo's inability to write letters derives from his attitude toward language, a notion which Jake reiterates in his book The Silencer. In this forgery, Jake develops a theory about the equivocality of language, an idea Hugo expresses in a conversation with Jake during which he states: "The whole language is a machine for making falsehoods" (60). Jake interprets Hugo's distrust of language as a "truth" and his silence as a kind of godliness. He does not expect, then, a seductive message from a god-figure, one who operates outside the machine of language. Hugo's silence, in fact, makes him even more compelling. Jake's simultaneous pursuit of the love message and of silence indicates his contradictory belief that language can evoke the truth of godly silence. A similar contradiction is evident when he uses language to declare the falseness of language in The Silencer. Jake's actions,

then, contradict his theories, activating the machine-net and perpetuating lies.

Viewing truth as elusive and seductive, Jake cannot compose letters to attract the attention of the absent lover. He writes only one love letter to Anna, a scribbled note written while he is drunk. As he begins to write, he experiences a dearth of sentiment: "I started to write to Anna, . . . but I could think of nothing to say to her except I love you, which I wrote several times over, very badly. I added, you are beautiful and sealed the letter" (102-3). Jake not only lacks the ability to write a compelling message, he repeats the love sentiment, indicating his lack of originality and his entrapment in the machine-net. By the time Jake mails the letter, Anna has left town and, henceforth, he has no idea of her whereabouts, a fact which precludes the possibility of sending her another letter. The sole participant in the creation of his fantasy, he has no one with whom to share his discourse. Anna's absence is absolute: to write compelling messages, one must have a willing recipient in the love-dialectic.

Further, Jake cannot write original messages but appropriates the language of others. His dependence on Hugo for the ideas in The Silencer, his emulation of Hugo's silence, and his translations of Jean-Pierre's books exemplify his plagiaristic tendencies. This desire to appropriate the language of others corresponds to his desire

to possess Anna. His pursuit of the elusive other is a plagiarism, a copy of the myths inherent in language.

When Jake returns from Paris, disappointed at not having found Anna, he cloisters himself in a room at Dave's where he awaits the daily visit of the postman, "the only real moment of the day" (200). Without messages to compel him, Jake is rendered immobile: forlornly he awaits news of his beloved, fearing the possibility of her eternal absence. Roland Barthes defines the lover's absence: "Any episode of language which stages the absence of the loved object--whatever its cause and its duration--and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment" (A Lover's 13). The absence of love messages indicates the one-sided, fantastical nature of Jake's pursuit; his feelings of abandonment, though painful, are self-created since there is no real person to return his love.

When Jake finally stops waiting for the love message and takes a job at the hospital next door to Dave's apartment, he discovers Hugo and thereby the truth which he has been so desperately seeking. By changing his repetitious behavior, Jake enters Murdoch's contingent world where unpredictable events bring about unexpected circumstances. Early in the novel Jake claims that he understands the contingent nature of reality: "My fates are such that as soon as I interest myself in a thing a hundred accidents happen which are precisely relevant to that thing" (33). We can see, however, that Jake interprets contingency

as a component of his ongoing fantasy--he believes that everything that happens is relevant to it, including the behavior of other people. The irony of Jake's discovering Hugo where he least expects to find him reflects the true irrelevance of contingency in Jake's pursuit. At this turning point in the novel the unstable world of Under the Net begins to unravel Jake's fantasy, revealing the equivocality of language.

In Murdoch's schema certain contingencies operate within language which disrupt the mythopoeic structure. When Hugo informs Jake that not only does he love Sadie, but that Anna does indeed love him, Jake discovers the true irrelevancy of his pursuit. The letters which Jake has been expecting from Anna have already been written to Hugo. This unexpected revelation reveals the contingent nature of humans that is inherent in their language. Jake's fantasy is then upset, forcing him to reexamine his conception of reality. Peter Wolfe points out that in Murdoch's novels "the world's radical instability" plays havoc with the character's efforts to distort the contingent, reawakening "the individual to the responsibility of his freedom" (31). Certainly Jake achieves some measure of awareness when he discovers after his conversation with Hugo that his pursuit has been based on false perceptions. But it is difficult for Jake, even with this knowledge, to end his saga. When he burglarizes Hugo's apartment, he wrestles with the desire to steal Anna's letters which he finds in Hugo's safe. No

longer compelled by Anna's mystery, he resists the urge, viewing her "as a separate being" (283). These references suggest that Jake experiences some measure of awareness or a "degree of freedom" but it is not a triumphant epiphany which exempts him from the charm of the net. He wonders, for example, if he "had finished with Hugo" (288), and when he hears Anna's voice singing over the radio at Mrs. Tinckhams' he responds "mechanically" to her voice.

His receipt of four letters at the end of the novel, however, suggests that at least this particular fantasy has ended: when Jake's desperate desire for the message has paled, he receives a plenitude unexpectedly. With this final irony, Murdoch suggests that communication is only possible with real, contingent people. Once Jake has removed himself from the trance of the net, he can then receive letters--although they are not the seductive love letters he has hoped for. Jake writes the last (love) letter of the novel when he responds to Sadie's request that he settle the Mars controversy by buying the dog. Responding to her solicitor with a letter and the 100 lbs., he shows that he can express love that is not imitative or possessive. In this comical ending, Jake loses his fantasy-love while gaining the love of a true friend--Mars, his canine companion.

In this first novel Murdoch responds to the kind of solipsistic protagonist, like Sartre's Roquentin, whom she has criticized in Sartre: Romantic Rationalist. According

to Murdoch, Roquentin's awareness of contingency isolates him from the reality of others, constituting an escape into the myth of the self. In Under the Net Murdoch mocks this notion by creating a protagonist who is similarly self-absorbed in such a myth. Jake's dead-end pursuit, however, describes the construction and final dissolution of that myth. When Roquentin encounters contingency, he realizes his personal freedom in an absurd world. Jake, on the other hand, realizes the mythical nature of his self-constructed reality.

A Fairly Honorable Defeat

"Human beings should be awfully careful about letters. They are such powerful tools. Yet people will write them, in moments of emotion too, and other people will fail to destroy them." (40)

In A Fairly Honorable Defeat Murdoch examines the coded nature of language, as evident in the identical nature of love messages. In this novel she creates characters whose failure to love arises from their self-deception and dissatisfaction. The most self-deluded characters are particularly susceptible to the illusory love message and, like Jake, interpret it for the purpose of creating or nurturing a love drama. While the characters' vulnerability arises from their own weaknesses, the consciously manipulative Julius King controls their behavior by recognizing the powerful influence of language and its ability to produce predictable responses in aspiring lovers. With such a power figure, Murdoch shows how easily people

can be manipulated and controlled by one who understands the language codes which evoke certain mechanical responses. Julius, who understands what "powerful tools" letters are, creates a love drama for the purpose of his own entertainment.

Julius functions as an unwelcome interloper in the patently bourgeois lives of Rupert and Hilda, a married couple who live in Priory Grove, an upper-middle-class neighborhood in London. Rupert leads the orderly life of a self-satisfied civil servant, who fancies himself an expert on morality. Hilda, an uneducated but intelligent housewife, adores her husband and savors the comfortable life they lead. Julius undermines this life when he makes a wager with Morgan, Hilda's sister and his former lover, claiming that he can destroy any relationship by playing on human vanity. Finding this notion amusing, Morgan accepts the wager and ostensibly, Julius plans the dissolution of a relationship between Simon, Rupert's brother, and his lover Axel. Unbeknownst to Morgan, Julius contrives to have Rupert and Morgan fall in love by sending them fraudulent love letters. He sends Rupert a love letter, which he has saved from his relationship with Morgan, and he sends Morgan an old love letter from Rupert to Hilda which he has stolen from her desk. Neither objects to the other's declaration of love and so a Platonic love affair between the two begins. Once Julius sets the machine going, Rupert and

Morgan begin writing love letters to one another and the complications commence.

Julius attributes the success of his charade to the identical nature of love sentiments. As he explains, "Almost all the letters began 'Darling' or 'Angel' or something equally ambiguous. In fact the style of love letters in a certain class of society is remarkably similar" (405). The recycling of old letters highlights the notion that humans respond mechanically to coded messages. Because of the ambiguity and impersonal quality of the message, identical words of endearment may comprise the intimate exchanges of countless lovers. Like the sentimental messages of Hallmark cards, marketed and designed for masses of people, the love letter lacks distinction. If love messages lack distinction, then so does human love, or at least what passes for love in Murdoch's terms. Julius' trick works because of the vanity of his victims, not their common love. Rupert and Morgan also respond readily to Julius' tricks because the language of the letters reiterates bourgeois ideals and aspirations with regard to love. Their particular self-absorption arises from their comfortable, bourgeois lives, and Murdoch points out the tendency of such a life to encourage consoling fantasies derived from the language of that class.

Rupert exemplifies the kind of self-deluded solipsist who populates much of Murdoch's fiction. He typifies the patriarchal father-figure whose financial success allows him

to act as provider and protector of his small family circle. This position, in turn, fosters in him a self-congratulatory smugness which he interprets as an indication of his personal "goodness." While Rupert regards his love for his family as "innocent affections" (248), his role as loving father is selfishly motivated, and his self-image needs to be rewarded with the language of self-love--that is, by flattery. This weakness for language proves to be destructive when Rupert responds mechanically to the flattery of the spurious letter from Morgan. She calls him "the wisest person I have ever met" and the "master" of "coolness and rationality" (252). Believing that he understands the nature of true love, Rupert decides to act "wisely" by pursuing a relationship with Morgan, rather than causing her possible harm by rejecting her.

Rupert's inability to express real love is evident in his rocky relationship with his recalcitrant son Peter, who rejects his values and lifestyle. Rupert faults himself for not being "wise" in his communication with his son and admits that he behaves mechanically by acting "the stern father" (23). Trapped in this conventional role, Rupert cannot write a letter to Peter expressing his love: "But Rupert knew too that his whole training, the whole of the society which kept him so stiffly upright and so patently and pre-eminently successful, had deprived him of the direct language of love" (138-9). While Rupert experiences some frustration from his inability to communicate with Peter, he

cannot sacrifice the comfortable social position and role which define his identity. In Murdochian terms, he seeks consolation in such a role, a weakness which entangles him in the ill-fated relationship with Morgan. Murdoch's notion of the consoling power of the love-myth emerges in Morgan's dissatisfaction and disquiet after her romance with Julius has ended. Julius' powerful influence over her derives from his mythical nature as she explains to Hilda, "Julius was almost all myth. That is what took me" (60). When Julius ends the relationship, Morgan must face the contingency of her own consciousness, freed from the myth that describes her reality. She is, in fact, searching for a myth to replace the one she has lost. Tallis, her husband, will not do because "he has no myth" (60), and thus she turns to her nephew Peter for a "free innocent love" which exists "outside the machine" (194). With this lip service to an ideal, Morgan expresses her need to create myths which will protect her from the contingency of human experience and consciousness. Like Jake, Morgan falsely believes she transcends the behavioristic net of language, perpetuating lies to keep her fantasy alive.

When Morgan receives Rupert's letter, she transfers her love interest to him, lying to Peter in a letter in which she claims she is leaving London for awhile. Instead, she begins the secret relationship with his father, who offers her a more substantial love, a more consoling fantasy. She recognizes that "she felt more at home with Rupert than she

did with either Julius or Tallis" and that he "might have made her happy" (272). Morgan's needy love lies firmly within the machine rather than outside, as she would have it. She exemplifies the kind of female character in Murdoch's fiction whose love fantasies arise from her dependence on a mythical male figure to give meaning to her life. While Jake is seduced by the elusive female other, Morgan is enthralled by the powerful image of a father-figure whose wisdom gives order and reason to her chaotic world. Her letters to Julius, which Rupert mistakenly believes are written to him, show how easily her discourse may be transferred from one power figure to another. By succumbing to such a myth, she denies not only her own reality but that of the men who constitute her fantasy.

Like Morgan, Hilda too seeks security and solace in a mythical relationship. Julius' scheme depends largely on Morgan and Rupert's shortcomings but also relies on his use of Hilda's love letters, implicating her in the fiasco. By saving letters, she demonstrates her faith in the sentiments therein and the inviolability of her perfect marriage. When she begins to suspect an affair between her husband and sister, she gets a "sick disconnected feeling," seeking comfort in Rupert's old love letters to her. Julius has, of course, stolen the letters and thereby stolen the love-myth which has defined her world.

In contrast to saving letters, discarding or destroying them indicates a desire to discontinue the romantic scenario. When Julius discards a letter from Morgan, he tries to destroy any illusions she may have about their resuming a relationship. Similarly, Morgan tears up a letter from Tallis to rid herself of his affections. The same gesture does not work, however, when at Rupert's request she tears up his letters to conceal their affair from Hilda. Destroying the evidence is not effective when the one who controls language, Julius, fuels the drama by planting a phoney letter in Rupert's desk for Hilda to find. The letter convinces Hilda that the relationship is sexual, a lie which causes her to leave Rupert, bringing about his despondency and subsequent drowning. Language not only returns to the source, but proliferates lies, entangling the composer in the chimeric net of her own weaving.

In contrast to these self-deceived characters, Murdoch introduces the simple, unpretentious Tallis, a reluctant and unprolific letter writer. His love for Morgan and his father Leonard suggests the possibility of loving without benefit of fantasy. Morgan, in fact, cannot tolerate the undramatic nature of his love and complains that "He never could write letters" (61). Tallis' letters, factual and honest, communicate without fictionalizing his emotional life. He does not construct a love fantasy to hide from the erratic inconstancy of his own consciousness, from contingency and its discomforting unpredictability. Not a

happy man, he lives with his imperfections rather than obfuscating them with highminded romantic vagaries. He continues to write letters to Morgan when she comes to London, but he realizes that he does so because of his fears and fantasy needs. This awareness distinguishes him from those characters who lack such introspection. As he explains to Julius: "I suppose it's cowardly to write letters. But if one writes letters one can go on hoping" (401). Tallis understands the solace afforded by language as well as the harm that it can perpetrate, but unlike Julius, he does not use this knowledge to control others.

He represents, then, one of Murdoch's good characters whose lack of a personal myth indicates an acceptance of his own contingent nature and the possibility of loving without benefit of fantasy. Tallis' honesty with himself and his reluctance to embellish his feelings with the language of love allows him a certain amount of freedom, but also places him in a disorderly, discomforting reality which offers no significant consolation.

An Accidental Man

"It had all been, like so many other things in the story, accidental." (438)

In An Accidental Man letters often appear in groups without benefit of narrative interruption, foregrounding the personal discourse of characters regarding accidental events in the novel. Critics have noted Murdoch's use of letters in this novel to introduce what she refers to as

"peripheral" or "accidental" characters with no main characters. For Richard Todd this novel "represents a considerable measure of success" (47) in Murdoch's efforts to introduce such characters into her fiction. Her use of letters as a narrative technique creates a kind of chorus effect as characters comment on the random events which comprise the plot. Epistolatory sections have minimal effect on the plot development but introduce the voices of diverse characters, whose perceptions of reality are markedly solipsistic.

In An Accidental Man letters emphasize the mythical nature of bourgeois discourse. While A Fairly Honorable Defeat focuses on the lives of a few characters caught up in the misuse of language, An Accidental Man establishes a small society whose daily discourse exemplifies the self-deception and cruelty inherent in their language. This society has little concern for the personal welfare of others and their affections, to a large degree, are feigned and self-motivated. Their gossip and slander indicate a kind of morbid pleasure which they derive from others' misfortunes. Such prattle not only maligns others but affirms the writer's superior position in an accidental world. Their preoccupation with the problems of others affirms their own good fortune as evident in the comfortable accident-free bourgeois world in which they live. Within the language of these letters Murdoch's conception of a middle-class myth emerges.

Numerous characters write letters to alleviate the difficulties of others whose lives appear muddled and desperate to the letter-writer. Their letters, however, reveal false sentiments composed by those who need to satisfy a false self-image, ratifying their own personal goodness. Those who are subject to such beneficent treatment exist to some degree outside the boundaries of the small social circle of the novel and are, therefore, contingent not only in their peripheral status but in the accidents which have created their hapless lives. Murdoch does not suggest that these are the only accidental characters, but that their place outside the social circle makes their lives more subject to contingent events and more pitiable to the characters inside the circle.

Austin Gibson Grey, the accidental man of the title, receives unwanted assistance from those inside the circle who want to help him put his life in order. Austin's haphazard existence produces many of the tragic incidents of the novel, events which fuel much of the gossip and feigned-concern of the letters. In the opening of the novel, we discover that Austin has separated from his wife Dorina and that he has lost his job. These circumstances provide ripe opportunity for well-intended intruders for whom he becomes a worthy cause. Clara and George Tisbourne, at the center of the small social circle, volunteer their help in finding Austin a new job. Austin's refusal of their help does not discourage them, however, as evident in a

letter from Clara to Dorina: "George, who sends his best regards by the way, is scouting around for a suitable post and has told Austin this, which has relieved Austin's mind very much indeed, so don't you worry either" (78). Clara's abundant, dissimulating letters mark her as the major busybody of the novel, and lies such as this one exemplify not only her blindness to Austin's wishes but her desire to console Dorina. Her sentiments, however, are a mere simulation of actual affection; her motive is to persuade Dorina to come live with her and George.

Later in a letter to her friend Hester, Clara gossips about Austin's having accidentally run over a little girl. In this letter the hyperbolic nature of her sentiments conceal the rather vicarious pleasure which she finds in the event: "Dearest Hester, have you heard the absolutely awful news? . . . Isn't it ghastly? . . . Oh dear, I can't think of anything but poor Austin, I must write to him, and I'm sure he'd be glad if you wrote too" (179). The gossip in the remainder of the letter reveals the true trivialities which comprise her bourgeois life. The last line of the letter reads, for example, "Are you coming to the opening of Mollie's boutique?" (179).

Austin also evokes help from his brother Matthew, who unexpectedly arrives in London as the novel begins. Contemplating the recent loss of his job, Austin considers the forthcoming intrusion of his friends who will not only gossip but offer their help. He wants to free himself of

their meddling and is particularly grateful for the absence of his brother: "Thank God Matthew was abroad, elsewhere forever, and that they had stopped writing to each other. The Tisbournes' sympathy would torment him. Matthew's sympathy might kill him" (23). Matthew's sympathy for his brother is not immediately apparent in his first missive to him. Claiming that he has returned to London to resolve old difficulties between them, he denies the real nature of his motives: "I do not presume to imagine that I can help you. But you can certainly help me" (81). We soon discover, however, that Matthew's *raison d'être* is to help others, as he thrives on adulation and others' dependency. Austin's refusal to mend the difficulties of the past plagues his brother, disturbing his image of himself as a saint. When he leaves London at the end of the novel, separating himself from his brother once again, we discover that Matthew has given up on Austin's "salvation." He leaves without notifying his brother, and in a letter to his former *ghuru* Kaoru reveals his true intentions in leaving London: "Perhaps this is my ultimate spitefulness against my brother [her emphasis], he said in the letter" (440). Matthew's fraternal concern for his brother conceals a need to make Austin one of his admirers, one who comes to him for advice and wisdom. His efforts to achieve some kind of spiritual goodness prove to be a sham and this admission in the letter reveals the selfish motivations which lie behind his benevolent facade.

All but Austin and his son Garth succumb to Matthew's charismatic personality. In a conversation with his friend Ludwig, Garth calls his uncle "a false prophet" describing him as follows: "He's a fat charmer, charming his way to paradise. He's the sort of person who makes everyone tell him their life story and then forgets it" (111). This evaluation proves to be quite accurate as most of the characters are indeed charmed by Matthew. He, furthermore, understands the powerful influence he has over people and his ability to seduce them with language. Contemplating a reunion with his former lover Mavis, Dorina's sister, he decides, "He would not write her. It was indeed essential that he should leave her alone since he must not, whatever else he did, go anywhere near Dorina" (129).

Matthew eventually writes Mavis and they resume their relationship. Though he makes no overtures to Dorina, she eventually seeks him out after discovering Austin in bed with another woman. His desire to stay away from Dorina derives from his earlier friendship with Austin's first wife Betty, who drowned "accidentally." Because of an ambiguous letter that Betty wrote to Matthew, Austin believes that the friendship was more than Platonic. This letter has denied Matthew the love and respect of his brother, and though he claims that Austin has interpreted it incorrectly, it contains at least this truth: that Matthew is not perfect. His determination to persuade Austin of the letter's innocence is motivated by his desire to perpetuate a

self-image that his brother refuses to affirm. This ambiguous letter bears evidence of the contingent, displacing the personal myth that Matthew assiduously tries to create with his own powerful use of language. The lack of one interpretation creates multiple possibilities which put into question Matthew's mythical role.

The ongoing dialogue of the letters between Ludwig Lefeverier and his father further examines the underlying motives of familial love. Ludwig, an American born in England, has determined to make England his home to avoid being drafted into the Vietnam war. His parents, European immigrants of Aryan German descent, strongly disapprove of his actions and try desperately to persuade him to change his mind. Ludwig's stalwart determination to remain in England does not exempt him from the guilt which he feels at having disappointed his parents: "He dreaded their letters in which, in language which both offended and touched him, they begged him to come home and get himself 'straightened out' " (13). In the Lefeverier's long letters to their son, Murdoch shows how the language of parental love is often authoritative and emotionally manipulative; Ludwig's mixed response to his parent's entreaties suggests how difficult it is to resist such emotional rhetoric. While trying to establish a separate reality of his own, within which he can make personal philosophical decisions, he must live with the disapproval of his parents and the subsequent guilt.

In his responses to his parents' letters, Ludwig resists their interference while trying to convince them that he has the right to make his own decisions. His letters imitate those of his parents, particularly his father's, in their assertiveness on the one hand and their familial sentiments on the other: "And see that now I must envisage a time when we shall all be united in peace and happiness in Europe. Please see it this way. I love you and I honour you and if I could obey you I would. But I must first obey my conscience, as you yourselves have always taught me to do. Please understand that my decision is firmly taken. And please write soon and forgivingly too" (88). Ludwig's dilemma, Murdoch suggests, is a universal one: to what degree does one's love for his country or parents affect his actions? His confusion is further compounded by his uncertainties about his ability to make right choices. The determination expressed in his letters belies his doubts concerning his decision to stay in England.

As the dialogue between parents and son progresses, the language of their familial love letters reveals a power struggle. When Mr. Lefeverier writes to concede to his son's wishes, then Ludwig achieves a sense of his own personal authority, as evident in his decision to return to America. In Mr. Lefeverier's last letter to his son he surrenders his authority, claiming that "love now unambiguously dictates a surrender of our former position" (400). While the language

of this letter demonstrates the same controlled reasoning of the former ones, it constitutes a surrender, giving Ludwig the freedom to act according to his own conscience. Released from the demands of his parents' authority, he returns to the United States to accept the consequences of his draft resistance. In the absence of his parent's emotional rhetoric, Ludwig must face up to the choices which he has so firmly defended in their dialogue. In short, he has the freedom that he has been seeking. This freedom, however, proves to be rather ambiguous as conversations with Matthew have influenced his decision although to him "it did not seem that Matthew had influenced him" (430). Matthew's interference renders Ludwig's freedom uncertain, suggesting how easily love becomes authoritative and how ambiguous one's personal choices really are. Ludwig's freedom, then, is contingent on the language of others, rendering his moral decisions uncertain and doubtfully based on his own personal authority.

In one way or another all of the characters in An Accidental Man attempt to control others, to seduce them with language, except for Dorina, who is powerfully controlled by her husband Austin. Her love letters to him reveal that she is imprisoned by the notion of his mythical godliness. The whole purpose of her being resides in him as expressed in a letter to him: "There is no God, but I pray to you and lodge therein the thought of you all the good that I know or dream of" (252). When she discovers Austin

in bed with Mitzi she runs immediately to Matthew transferring her myth to him. When he insists that she leave his home and refuses to correspond with her, she runs away to a hotel where she is "overwhelmed with misery and fear" (364). With no myth to protect her, she experiences the contingent nature of her own consciousness, which makes her physically ill, much like Nausea's Roquentin. Unlike Roquentin, however, her realization of the world's contingency, which is for her the absence of God, is tragically displayed in her freakish death: an electric stove which she has balanced on the lavatory falls into the tub while she is bathing. Dorina's unfortunate death is ironically counterpoised by Austin's rather bright outcome. Having caused so much harm to others, he emerges quite unscathed by his actions. Personal outcomes, the novel suggests, are not based on a reasonable or fair measure of personal goodness but depend largely on chance events. Death and suffering occur in a random fashion without regard for personal merit. This stark reality underlies many of the characters' attempts to deny such a world view and to console themselves with fantasies which conceal the accidental nature of existence. The novel, however, makes it clear that Austin is no more accidental than any of the other characters, as evident in this piece of cocktail party dialogue: " 'Austin is like all of us only more so.' 'He gets away with it' " (445). The language of the letters in An Accidental Man attempt to cover up how much everyone is

just like Austin. They create, in short, fictions to conceal this Murdochian conception of human nature.

The Black Prince

"What dangerous machines letters are. Perhaps it is as well that they are going out of fashion. A letter can be endlessly reread and reinterpreted, it stirs imagination and fantasy, it persists, it is red-hot evidence." (184)

In The Black Prince Murdoch creates another solipsistic lover whose downfall arises from a love fantasy. Bradley Pearson, the narrator and fantasist, composes his book in prison, describing it as a love story and recollection of events which lead up to his incarceration. Bradley believes in the magic of language, using the sorcery of letters to defend himself against the reality of others. He also finds consolation in secrecy--an occult effort to exclude others from his reality. He invests love with supernatural power, a fantasy which lifts him from his frustrating struggles in the contingent world to a lofty, god-like position outside the machine of language.

In an interview with William Slaymaker, Murdoch describes her novels as battles between magic and freedom or magic and goodness. As she explains, "one has to be aware of magic, in general, it's a 'lower condition'" (431). In Murdoch's novels, we find characters investing language with magical significance to empower themselves. This misapprehension is a lower condition because it gives supernatural meaning to the character's personal myth,

offering a specious transcendence that excludes the mundane reality of others. The language of love, for example, allows Bradley to experience a kind of mock-transcendence, allowing him to perceive the real. While he believes that love has brought him freedom, Murdoch suggests that he is imprisoned by his own magical tricks. Bradley is, in fact, a prisoner of his own love story, an artist who has encapsulated himself in the fantasy of his novel. Such a position renders his narrative unreliable; his guilt or innocence lies within the unfolding subtext of Bradley Pearson's story.

Living an isolated life, Bradley wants to keep potential affection at a distance. Letters figure in his defensive efforts because they allow him communication without personal contact. Early in the novel his privacy is impinged upon by a series of characters who interrupt his plans to leave London for a seaside retreat where he plans to write his third novel. His former brother-in-law, Francis, arrives to inform him that Bradley's ex-wife and Francis' sister, Christian, has taken up residence in London. While trying to get rid of Francis, Bradley's friend Arnold Baffin calls to say that he may have killed his own wife Rachel. Bradley, then, goes to his friends' home to find the aftermath of a violent fight between the two. Rachel, hiding in the bedroom, has suffered a blow from a fire poker wielded by Arnold. The next morning Bradley writes a series of letters to sever contact with

this small group of characters who have interrupted his plans. He describes his need to write letters: "I am, I must confess, an obsessive and superstitious letter-writer. When I am troubled I will write any long letter rather than make a telephone call A letter is a barrier, a reprieve, a charm against the world, an almost infallible method of acting at a distance" (62-3).

The distancing effects of letters translate as magic for Bradley, allowing him the sanctitude of his solitary reality. But before he can leave town, his sister, Priscilla, arrives at his door distraught after having left her husband. Disgruntled by the imposition and insensitive to her needs, he unsuccessfully tries to persuade her to go back to her husband. He fails to convince her, however, and the same day she attempts suicide, further thwarting his efforts to leave town. Lacking the countervailing recourse of a letter to put Priscilla at a distance, Bradley escapes the situation and the responsibility by allowing Christian and Francis to take care of her. He excuses himself by saying that "he doesn't love her enough to be any use to her," describing his feelings for her as "mechanical."

In Iris Murdoch's Comic Vision Angela Hague explains Bradley's defensive use of language: "People and situations that pose a threat to Bradley's emotional isolation and serenity are frequently treated in a detached, ironic manner which lessens their stature and importance for both the reader and the narrator" (105). Bradley defends himself

against others by downplaying their importance to him, using language to deny emotions which might threaten his consoling reality. By fictionalizing his own emotional life, he hopes to attenuate the importance of others' reality.

Bradley's inability to express love extends to other characters for whom he has ambivalent feelings. The arrival of Christian upsets him considerably, and though he claims to detest her, his vehement objection to her presence in London speaks otherwise. The language of a letter to her contradicts his intended rebuff: behind every negative "not" and "no," a "yes" speaks, expressing his hidden desire. For example, "There is nothing of a cordial or forward-looking import to be read 'between the lines.' My act of writing to you does not betoken excitement or interest" (66). The letter contains 17 negative constructions: rhetorical obstructions to hide Bradley's true feelings. Neither this letter nor the others repulses the receiver, but all act like invitations to those who read between the lines.

Both Christian and Francis become involved in the caretaking of his sister, as well as Arnold and Rachel Baffin and their daughter Julian. As the emotional climate thickens, Bradley becomes more uncomfortable with his unprotected world, and is particularly discomfited by the developing friendship between Christian and Arnold. His jealousy of Arnold's far more prolific and successful writing career magnifies the threat. As a result, he

resorts to a more powerful defense: he has a secret, though Platonic, affair with Arnold's wife Rachel.

Secretiveness, or the withholding of language, provides Bradley with a backup defense when his letters fail to provide a comforting barrier. His relationship with Rachel makes him feel "defended against Arnold. There was something important to him which I knew and he did not" (126). The morning after their first kiss, Bradley feels the desire to write her "an ambiguous letter" (127), an indication of his need to conceal his real intentions while maintaining a secret language between them. Rachel forestalls him, however, by sending him a very straightforward letter in which she asks him to be her "ally." Bradley recognizes that he and Rachel have joined in an alliance against Arnold, but he wishes that she had not spoken so explicitly about their motives. Bradley wants to use language in an occult way so that he can find protection in its mysteriousness. Letters can provide insulating magic if they keep secrets not only from the excluded party, but from the receiver and sender as well.

Rachel's need to tell secrets, however, proves to be the undoing of Bradley's emotional barriers when she tells Arnold about the affair. Trapped in the machine of her marriage, she believes that revealing secrets will free her from those confines. In contrast to Bradley, who wants to be a prisoner of language, Rachel wants to escape the machine by having an open relationship with both men. She

translates this freedom in a spiritual sense, telling Bradley that as a result of their mutual love, "We've become Gods" (139). The desire of Murdoch's characters to be god-like constitutes a denial of their imperfect human nature and a desire for mythical stature. Human imperfection is the contingency which renders them powerless in a frightening, accidental world. By seeking a transcendent, perfect love, they express a faith in some spiritual condition which sanctifies their actions and justifies their existences, a kind of absolution of the contingent.

With no secrets to console him, the old anxiety returns, and Bradley's emotional vulnerability puts him in "an obscure frenzy" (145). He feels "that strong urge to do something, to act, which often afflicts people in unanalysable dilemmas. If one can only act, depart, return, send a letter, one can ease the anxiety which is really fear of the future in the form of fear of the darkness of one's present desires" (145). Desperate and disconsolate, Bradley does act: he mails a scathing review of Arnold's new book which he has been hesitating to send. With this act Bradley exemplifies the Murdochian fantasist who lacks the self-discipline to control the powerful influence of his emotions. Mechanically, he acts rather than reflects, and in so doing causes harm to others.

As we continue to read between the lines of Bradley's love story, a secret which the entire novel serves to reveal

begins to surface. The obscurity of his previously mentioned frenzy conceals the true object of his desire. If letters mechanically deny his affection for others, ironized beyond the sender's awareness, then the review of Arnold's book and the secret relationship with Rachel conceal the real object of his desires and source of his fears--Arnold. While Bradley tells himself and the reader that his contempt for Arnold arises from their professional rivalry, this excuse belies another more intimate connection. Because of his love for Arnold, he acts aggressively in order to alienate him. By sending the review he tries to rid himself of the one who causes his obscure anxiety.

In addition to his covert pleasure at having "scored off" Arnold in his relationship with Rachel, he continues to ignore Arnold's suggestions that they begin to write to one another again. By withholding language he tries to alienate his friend. Arnold, however, is not easily rebuffed, but continues to try to break through Bradley's silence. It is only when Bradley falls in love with Arnold's young daughter Julian that he succeeds in making an enemy of his long-time friend. With this new magic, Bradley alienates Arnold and finally escapes London.

When Bradley falls in love with Julian he feels like a "god," experiencing an "overwhelming sense of reality" (209). No longer needing the edifice of language to keep Arnold at a distance, he enacts a simulated escape from the defensive mechanisms which have enslaved him, experiencing

the spiritual (though spurious) freedom which Rachel has earlier described. Because of his godly status, he no longer needs language to defend himself against unwanted intruders or to express his love to Julian. Neither he nor Julian write letters to one another, and he secretly leaves London without writing letters to inform his friends of his departure.

The flimsy facade of Bradley's fantasy quickly collapses, however, when the suicide of his sister prompts Francis to seek his whereabouts. Finding a letter from the travel agent in Bradley's desk, he discovers the location of their retreat and sends Bradley a telegram. Bradley then experiences the same karmic retribution as other Murdoch solipsists, as letters and language uncover the concealed. His inability to love his sister and to recognize the contingent nature of her reality brings about the dissolution of his perfect life. In one final effort to keep his fantasy intact, Bradley keeps Priscilla's death a secret from Julian. Informed of their whereabouts by Francis, Arnold arrives at the love-nest and exposes Bradley's secret. Unbeknownst to Bradley, he also brings a letter to Julian from her mother describing her recent affair with Bradley. Bradley's need to conceal language by keeping secrets proves fatal to his love-fantasy. Julian leaves him in the middle of the night and he never sees her again. As sending and receiving letters reveal the secrets of Bradley's fictional world, they also reveal the

complexity of the human emotions involved in our relationships with other people. Letters are "powerful tools" as Julius King has said because they record the erratic, everchanging nature of human emotions.

On his return to London Bradley writes letters in an attempt to find Julian, who has been secreted away by her father. Like Jake, however, he cannot retrieve his lost fantasy with compelling messages. When Rachel tells him about her letter to Julian, he retaliates by showing her a letter which Arnold had written to him confessing his love for Christian and enlisting Bradley's help in explaining to Rachel. Although Arnold's emotions regarding Christian have changed by the time Rachel reads the letter, the language of this fleeting affection still remains to harm the sender. With letter in hand, Rachel returns home and kills Arnold with the same fire poker which he had struck her with at the beginning of the novel. Mechanically, language brings the characters back to where their story began. When Bradley arrives at the scene, he performs his last act of concealment by destroying the crumpled letter that he discovers on the floor beside Arnold's body. Ironically, this belated concern for another's welfare, a gesture to protect Rachel, proves to be his undoing. When the police arrive they arrest Bradley for the murder of Arnold Baffin.

By giving Rachel this final letter of the novel, Bradley kills Arnold with language, insuring a permanent end to the communication between them. By destroying the

letter, he effectively protects Rachel from prosecution for the crime, taking back the language that he had used to harm another. Because of his abuse of language and inability to love, Bradley must suffer for Arnold's death. Convicted of murder and given a life sentence, Bradley is incarcerated. A prisoner of language, he finally finds the privacy and distance he needs to write his novel--The Black Prince: A Celebration of Love.

The Sea, The Sea

"But the past refused to come back, as it did in dreams to be remade." (414)

Charles Arrowby, the central figure and narrator of The Sea, The Sea, recounts his story in the form of a journal; his memoirs relate the incidents which occur after his retirement to Shruff End, a fin-de-siècle home on the seaside. A former theatre director, Charles has given up the life of the stage to seek a calm, tranquil existence bereft of vanity. Charles resembles other Murdochian solipsists who perceive themselves in a better light than they appear. In this novel Murdoch examines the seductive power of the past which compels people to want to repeat it. Memory, an act of replication, reinterprets events for the consoling benefit of the one who harbors regrets and wishes to return to the past or to relive it. Over the age of 60, Charles has never recovered from the loss of his first love, Mary Hartley, who ended the relationship without explanations. Through the years he has idealized her,

remaining unmarried because of this unexorcised ghost from the past. He has continued to hope that he would find her again and so he has waited, deferring other romantic involvements for this elusive one.

Charles contends that he has forsaken the fame and power of a successful life in the theatre to find happiness and peace in the reclusive life. His egotism, nurtured and encouraged by the stage-life, remains quite healthy, however, and it is soon obvious that he still needs the adulation and servility of others. In the early pages of his journal, he finds it troubling that he has received no letters from his friends. His aspiration for the cloistered life rings hollow as his need for communication makes him and the reader question the sincerity of his new lifestyle. In a letter to a former lover, Lizzie, he asks her to come live with him at Shruff End, further evidence of his dissatisfaction and preoccupation with the past. Finding consolation in hindsight, Charles remembers and waits for a message from the past to console him in his disturbing present.

More than adulation, Charles needs obedience. He exemplifies the kind of fantasist whom Murdoch describes as one who wants to impose his will on others. In The Sovereignty of Good she explains this notion: "What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called 'will' or 'willing' belongs to

this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love" (67). That Charles cannot love according to Murdoch's definition is evident when he interprets Lizzie's letter refusing his request as a weak protestation of his more powerful influence over her. Recounting their love affair, he explains, "I was touched by her love and by her superb obedience..." (50). Interpreting Lizzie's letter for the benefit of his own power-fantasy, Charles reads surrender in her objections and adulation in her expression of love, but is unmoved by her objection to his previous ill-treatment of her. Charles, then, interprets the language of love according to the needs of his own powerful will, while ignoring the needs and the reality of the letter-writer.

Murdoch's novels are populated with characters who submit to the will of a power figure. Female characters, easily seduced by such figures, fail to recognize or accept the reality of their own lives. Hence, they surrender their personal freedom to find security in the spurious reality of another. Lizzie, for example, cannot resist Charles's charismatic influence over her and writes him another letter consenting to his request to come and live with him. Before this letter arrives at Shruff End, Charles discovers Hartley living with her husband in the local village. After an encounter with Hartley in a local church during which she promises to "write to him later" (136), he writes another letter to Lizzie claiming that he agrees with her first

objection. When he receives the second letter from Lizzie, he refers to it as a "shifty missive" (141) and writes a telegram reiterating the rejection contained in his letter to her. Charles' self-absorption again allows him to manipulate and interpret language in a way which fits the needs of the moment. Lizzie's submission to his request further quells his desire for her, indicated in the tone of his comment that, "She almost made it seem as if she was endeavoring to oblige me" (141). This elusive first-love attracts him far more than Lizzie's compliant love. Once Charles recognizes Hartley's youthful face in the aged, tired one of the old woman she has become, he begins an obsessive campaign to steal her away from her husband Ben.

When Charles does not receive a letter from Hartley, he intrudes upon her marriage, visiting her home without invitation and secretly sending letters to command her allegiance. Though Hartley resists his interference, he convinces himself that she objects to his overtures out of fear of her husband. Eager to prey upon what he perceives as her weak will, he becomes more aggressive in his pursuit and irrational in his thinking. When waiting for her to succumb to his will proves too frustrating, he decides: "I had waited long enough on Hartley's will, and I was beginning to believe that she wanted me to force her" (319). When Charles's fantasy-love does not submit willingly to his advances, he takes her captive in his home, sealing his

conquest with a succinct letter to her husband informing him that Hartley is at Shruff End.

While Charles keeps Hartley a prisoner at Shruff End, he attempts to revive her memories of their former relationship. This effort proves ineffectual, however, when her memories do not correspond to his own. Referring to their youthful love as a "dream . . . made of lies" (32), Hartley recognizes the equivocal nature of memory and its tendency to create fictions out of past experiences. Charles's fantasy, however, depends on his denial of change. Refusing to acknowledge the ongoing process of life with its multiple permutations and diverse alterations, he denies the contingent nature of human experience. By refusing to accept the inevitable changes which have occurred during the years they have been apart, he tries to force his own false notion of reality upon the present. Hartley, the old woman, is not the young girl whom he once loved, nor is he the young boy who once loved her.

Because contingency produces changes in the process of living, it eventually arrests the mechanical fantasy-life of the perpetrator, whose nemesis is the language of his own invention. When Hartley does not respond willingly to her captivity, Charles' cousin James persuades him to write a letter to her husband confessing the abduction. Intended to soften Ben's treatment of his wife on her return, the letter admits to Charles' delusory pursuit. It reads, for example, "I did not act out of malice, but out of the promptings of

an old romantic affection which I now see to have nothing to do with what exists at present" (330). Hartley thus escapes him with a letter in which Charles confesses to his own wrongdoing. By revealing Charles's true motivations, language upsets the love-fantasy.

Hartley's final escape from Charles occurs as the result of a love letter she writes inviting him to come to tea. When he arrives, she and Ben inform him of their plans to move to Australia. Alone with Hartley on the porch, he hands her another letter and pleads with her not to leave. Pulling away from him, she answers: "You haven't understood--" (424). Without an invitation, he visits them again the next day only to find them gone and the house bare of furniture. In the bathroom he discovers his unopened letter hidden under the linoleum. This chosen hiding place reaffirms the false notions which have compelled Charles' pursuit of his first love. Earlier in the novel he has wondered whether she will secretly write him a letter in the bathroom out of the watchful eye of Ben. Instead, she has hidden his letter in the bathroom, an indication of her desire to not only to hide Charles' delusory sentiments but also to escape his entrapping language. Charles' power is then diminished by the discarded love letter and the escape of Hartley--a situation brought about by the only letter which she has written to him "for over forty years" (414). The love letter, for which he has been desperately waiting, proves to be the vehicle through which his fantasy escapes

him--a circumstance brought about his efforts to control the language of love and thereby deny the changing nature of reality.

After this final escape, Charles gives up his pursuit, and in his Postscript he recognizes in hindsight that "I have battered destructively and in vain upon the mystery of someone else's life and must cease at last" (490). This comment suggests that he has recognized Hartley as a real person rather than a fictional one whose freedom he has violated by trying to force his will upon her. In his Postscript we find him recollecting in order to understand his previous behavior, and enjoying solitude in the aftermath of his dramatic story. He also interprets the language of love differently than in the past: "I have reread Lizzie's letters . . . At the time they seemed to be mere outpourings of self-deceiving nonsense. Now they seem rather touching, even wise" (494). At the end of the novel, Charles experiences the changes which he has claimed to experience as he began his journal. His use of language to control others proves to be the instrument of change which frees him from the power fantasy and the love story The Sea, The Sea.

Glimpses Of The Real

"The whole language is a machine for making falsehoods." (60)

Murdoch's abundant use of letters to support her fictional structures contributes to the overall mythical

framework of her novels, suggesting that language creates and controls our fantasies and deceptions about reality. The language of love, as I have discussed it in these novels, reveals the various ways in which we distort our perceptions of others in the name of love, denying their reality as separate beings.

Although Murdoch seems to agree with Hugo's notion that "The whole language is a machine for making falsehoods" (Under 60), she also proposes that language can provide glimpses of the real, offering us a vehicle for perceiving others more clearly--as contingent and separate from us. While she offers good characters, whose acceptance of the contingent reality of others prevents them from egregiously abusing language, these characters do not occupy a transcendental place outside the net. Her novels do not claim, for example, that what-is-love exists outside the net, but that fantasy or what-is-not-love exists within language. Goodness, for Murdoch, describes acts of reflection which help us, through self-discipline, to deny the compulsion to create solipsistic fictions. This denial requires that we face the contingency of others, affirming their freedom and giving ourselves an opportunity to express real love.

CHAPTER TWO
SACRED AND PROFANE: WOMAN AS SPIRITUAL IDEAL

Frequently, in Murdoch's fiction women take on the role of the other whose identity is defined by the other characters' mythification of her. The other in this paradigm loses authenticity as a separate, independent being. Such a view corresponds to a large extent to Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex in which she reformulates Sartre's theory of the other as object by showing how women are subject to such objectification. Women, she explains, find themselves "living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (xxviii). In this way, men "propose to stabilize her as an object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego . . . which is essential and sovereign" (xxviii). Murdoch's fiction provides numerous examples of women whose images are appropriated by powerful male figures attempting to establish such sovereignty. In these scenarios the struggle between oppressor and victim has different consequences; in some cases, the female character succumbs to her role as image, while in others she attempts to wrest herself from such a position. In the first case the female character fails to take responsibility for her own self-actualization, an idea

similar to de Beauvoir's notion that women too can practice "bad faith" through complicity with their own objectification. In the latter case the female character attempts to shed the ideology of otherness, a concept that not only de Beauvoir but other feminist critics, such as Mary Daly, have espoused.

Josephine Donovan sees in Murdoch's fiction and theories a women's epistemology which, following Wittgenstein and Simone Weil, denies a rational, Newtonian world view. She explains: "The implications of Murdoch's theory are that the I-it view of Newtonian science must give way to a more comprehensive vision that accepts the 'thou-ness' of life beyond the self and accepts the importance and reality of dimensions beyond the rational" (182). The mythical framework of Murdoch's novels often depends on this kind of rational model wherein the female characters become an indeterminate element which other characters appropriate for the purpose of keeping their world ordered. With this kind of fictional schema Murdoch describes how power structures work and how women figure in them. There is the question, of course, whether her fictional representations of women simply reappropriate a male-centered discourse, replicating an image that limits and textualizes her within the confines of the novel.

In the following analysis I will suggest that Murdoch's mythical worlds, whether based on philosophical paradigms or archetypal stories, confront the question of their own

credibility by exposing the false order or deceptive images on which they are founded. Alice Ostricker's discussion of how myth can be useful to female poets provides a valuable way of looking at Murdoch's fiction: "But in them [poems] the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead . . . they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival" (318). It seems to me that Murdoch's recapitulation of women's place in cultural myths exemplifies an effort to unsettle and "correct" the images of women as mystified other.

In the three books studied in this chapter, I show how women are trapped within certain spiritual-myths which have in common the reification of woman as a spiritual ideal. I use the term spiritual to describe what I observe in Murdoch's novels as a belief in a transcendent source of power which exists beyond the physical plane in another world or "other" world. The spiritual aspirant depends on the image of woman for access to this world, and thus she comes to represent a source of spiritual power and knowledge. The spiritualized woman constitutes a hidden meaning which prompts the will to power and also makes her

desireable. By investing the female other with a spiritual meaning, the power-figure hopes to control or explain his existence through appropriating her image. The desire for spiritual knowledge and sexual desire become confused within the power myth, however. Woman's spiritual mystery invests her with a certain indeterminacy which is both threatening and attractive to the male character, who may view this indeterminacy in different ways: as the hidden meaning of existence, as God, or as death. The spiritual myth, then, constitutes a discourse of desire which is power-centered, the structure of which depends on this sacred image of woman.

The female other in this system has no discourse of desire and must define her own pleasure through the language of power which frames her. Her desire arises from her own desirability and the mystery of her naming which has the effect of silencing her, leaving the nature of her desire indiscernible. Many of Murdoch's female characters struggle to free themselves from their constraints, seeking a place outside the spiritual myth of patriarchy. Murdoch does not establish where this place might be, but her novels do suggest that freedom is an ongoing process whereby one removes the layers of mythological conditioning that controls one's behavior. Her novels do not establish an ideal place for this experience of freedom since, in her schema, it is never wholly attainable. As I previously mentioned, Murdoch also creates female characters who

contribute to their imprisonment by refusing to resist the boundaries of mythical discourse, remaining placed within that power system as an image or symbol. Of course, Murdoch's fictional worlds create numerous power scenarios which depict women abusing power and which show the victimization of men as well.

Architectural boundaries—walls, houses, and rooms—confine many of Murdoch's female characters, prisons within which the women are subject to the desires of the male figures. This denial establishes her purity and perfection, producing such idealized images as goddess, angel or nun, a spiritual status that makes her desireable to the one who worships her. The spiritual place exists as both a sanctuary and a prison—an illusory space enclosing the sacred woman. Within this space the male character is torn between a desire to know the sacred object and a desire to distance himself from her. He experiences both elation and repulsion, indications of his ambivalence toward the acquisition of spiritual knowledge. The scene of desire produces a tension which arises from the impossibility of satisfaction. Because the spiritual must remain mysterious, there can be no fulfillment—pleasure must be derived from the tension which arises from the conflicting emotions of love and fear of the sacred woman. The spiritual image of the woman is not wholly pure, however, but embodies a threatening evil. Julia Kristeva establishes a link between the sacred woman and what she refers to as the abject: "As

abjection—so the sacred. Abjection accompanies all religious constructions and reappears, in order to be elaborated in a new guise, at the time of their collapse" (167). Similarly, in Murdoch's novels the sacred image of woman embodies contradictory opposites: good/evil, pure/impure, licit/illicit.

The Unicorn

The Unicorn, one of Murdoch's Gothic novels, begins with Marian Taylor's entrance into the savage landscape of Gaze Castle, where she has accepted a job as governess for a Mrs. Crean-Smith who resides there. Fearful of the wild, untamed land with its black cliffs, violent sea, and sparse vegetation, she approaches the castle in the Land Rover with her escorts, employees of Mrs. Crean-Smith: "She feared the rocks and the cliffs and the grotesque dolmen and the ancient secret things" (13). Dorothy Winsor claims that "The pre-civilized quality of the setting makes it both a metaphor for and a fitting location for primitive sex and violence" (126). For Winsor the Gothic setting represents and comments on the primitive nature of hidden primal instincts. I suggest, however, that the book's setting acts less as a symbol for the repressed than as a place where symbols collapse, causing the dissolution of boundaries between the spiritual and sexual impulses of the characters. While the symbols and setting do suggest and mark boundaries between an inside (dark and frightening world) and an

outside one, this demarcation proves to be a false creation of the characters who attempt to control others (and thereby their reality) through such false divisions.

Gaze Castle sits at the center of the wild landscape, where Hannah, "the image of the significance of suffering," has been sequestered by her husband Peter Crean-Smith. A small group of servants, headed by Gerald Scottow, tend to her needs but also act as her jailers. Her husband imprisoned her there after she committed adultery with a neighbor, Peter Lejour, then, according to rumor, attempted to push him over a cliff during an argument. As the symbolic figure of the novel, Hannah takes on mythical significance to the other characters. As a unicorn she represents the perfect Christ of Christianity and the original animal-monster of Roman myth. As Peter Conradi explains: "The unicorn of the title is a leading symbol of Christ in medieval bestiaries" (123). To the other characters she becomes an object of worship because of her martyrdom; her suffering makes their lives more meaningful. Her sins against patriarchy—the adultery and attempted murder—however, violate the boundaries dividing the spiritual marytr and the flawed human. As a sufferer she becomes a spiritualized figure (an angel), but her adultery and attempt to kill her husband renders her a Lilith or demon—a two-fold symbol of good and evil. Peter Conradi clarifies this notion: "Hannah's worshippers are also her gaolers. If she is ambiguous, so are they. She is the

source and repository of the idea of the ambiguity of Eros, but in needing her to play the roles both of Christ and tainted enchantress, they collude. Spirituality, sex and power are throughout the story richly confused" (123).

Hannah's ambiguity increases her desirability, making her the center of the voyeuristic gaze, as evident in the name of the castle. As the object of the gaze, Hannah is trapped by the image which others have made of her; the voyeuristic gaze requires a certain detachment or distancing which separates the image from the gazer. The boundary between the two imprisons Hannah as well as the characters who idolize and fear her. The demarcations born from her mythical naming and these false divisions drawn between her and the other characters create the illusion of spiritual knowledge. This epistemology, however, depends on the erection of dead images. In a conversation with Effingham, one of her worshippers who questions her unwillingness to free herself, Hannah says she doesn't "feel much any more" and to leave the Castle "would make me be something." In the same conversation Effingham recognizes that she is dead (101). The mythical names framing or incarcerating Hannah are empty of meaning. There is no temptress, no sorceress, no enchantress, no unicorn, no Christ, no angel, no monster because there is no Hannah—the object of the gaze is dead.

In one sense Hannah resembles Woolf's angel in the house: she exists to please those who use her image to mythologize their reality. She has indeed given up her self

to become a symbol. Gilbert and Gubar comment on this kind of sacrifice: "Whether she becomes an objet d'art or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self—of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both—that is the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead" (25). Hannah's acceptance of her imprisonment is a major question of the novel as certain characters try to explain her acquiescence. Marian, the newcomer, theorizes that Hannah's surrender to her captivity was initially motivated by fear: "Then she became rather apathetic or miserable. Then she began to find her situation sort of interesting, spiritually interesting. People have got to survive, and they'll always invent some way of surviving, of seeing their situation as tolerable" (129). If we accept Marian's interpretation, then it appears that Hannah succumbs to the incarcerating gaze to make her life more tolerable, finding meaning in her own reification. In this way Hannah "avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence" succumbing to "the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing" (Donovan 124). If we assume that Hannah can gain freedom by killing the angel in the house, then the responsibility for her imprisonment lies with her. There seems, after all, to be ample opportunity for escape. I suggest, however, that Hannah cannot be freed or free herself within the confines of the novel because she exists

only as a spiritual idea. In this sense my reading of Hannah agrees with Ben Obsumelu's point that "The Unicorn does not make sense as the realistic novel which its critics insist that it should be" (315).

Hannah's symbolic significance is analyzed by Max Lejour, the owner of Riders, an adjacent estate from which the occupants watch the activities of Gaze Castle. As the philosopher of the novel, Max is minimally involved in the book's action. In dialogues with his former student, Effingham, he attempts to explain Hannah's imprisonment and suffering. Such analysis shows how philosophy, in attempting to clarify the ambiguities of human behavior, can reduce the individual to a seductive ideal. Max suggests, for example, that Hannah's behavior may conform to the Greek notion of Ate which holds that victims of power transfer their suffering to others. In the same conversation, he posits that perhaps Hannah is one of the good "who does not attempt to pass the suffering on." When Effingham questions him on this point, he offers another interpretation: "She may be just a sort of enchantress, a Circe, a spiritual Penelope keeping her suitors spellbound and enslaved" (107). Max's interpretation suggests an ambivalent attitude toward the objectified female other whose indeterminacy incorporates a transcendent goodness and a seductive evil.

Max exemplifies the philosopher-oppressor who frequently appears in Murdoch's novels. His theories about Hannah attempt to analyze her situation without taking into

consideration her actual suffering. He reveals his clinical interest in Hannah when he confesses: "Perhaps Hannah is my experiment!" (110). Max's absence from the novel's action marks him as the ultimate gazer, the one who observes Gaze Castle to discern truths about human good and evil. Max's distancing of Hannah—his reticence to become involved in her life—amounts to a fascination greater than that of the other worshippers. This philosophical distancing, the novel suggests, provides the foundation for scientific discourses which analyze human phenomena without consideration for the "real" other who is the subject of study. In Spurs Derrida describes how "woman" functions as the transcendent idea in philosophical discourse: "Distance—woman—averts truth—the philosopher. She bestows the idea. And the idea withdraws, becomes transcendent, inaccessible, seductive. It beckons from afar (in die Ferne). Its veils float in the distance. The dream of death begins. It is woman" (89). Max's speculations about Hannah—his philosophical myth-making—would not be possible without her absence which constitutes "the dream of death." Unlike Effingham and Marian who seek to resurrect Hannah, Max, as philosopher, requires her death to support his theoretical discourse.

Apparently, a tacit complicity exists in this non-relationship between Hannah and Max: their reciprocal absence magnifies their fascination for one another. After Hannah's actual death Max explains that "She loved what wasn't there, what was absent" (294). While we can read

this comment as referring to Hannah's love for her own absence within the idealized image of the unicorn, the novel suggest that she loves Max because of his absence: she wills him her estate. As the ultimate gazer, detached and removed in his own castle, Max is Hannah's absent other—a prisoner of his own philosophical gaze. As Effingham suggests, "You are a prisoner, of books, age, and ill health. It then occurred to him that in some curious way Max might derive consolation from the spectacle, over there in the other house, of another captivity, a distorted mirror image of his own" (105). Thus the entrapped idea of the philosopher reflects his own entrapped position as gazer.

When Marian enters this world "She had been settled, perhaps too settled, in her job as a schoolmistress" (6). She has also experienced a disappointment in love and is ready for a new beginning, an "adventure." Obviously in search of a "romance" she accepts the offer at Gaze Castle. The adventure, however, doesn't unfold until Denis has told her the story of Hannah. When he explains to her that the local people believe that something will happen to Hannah as it does in fairy tales, at the end of seven years, she discovers her place in the story. Believing that her arrival at the end of the seventh year of Hannah's imprisonment is no accident, she experiences a revelation: "A prophetic flash of understanding burned her with a terrible warmth. That was what she was for; she was for Gerald Scottow: his adversary, his opposite angel. By

wrestling with Scottow she would make her way into the story" (67). With this realization Marian becomes a character in the myth, rather than a curious outsider. She finds her place as an opposite, an other who will spar with the powerful figure of Gerald by trying to free Hannah. Interpreting this role as both sexual and spiritual, she becomes an angel of rescue who "burns" with physical desire for Gerald.

When Marian enters this symbolic world she begins to experience the sexual urges that underly the power edifice. Yet such feelings are commingled with fear as evident in her entry into the "violent" sea below the cliffs: "Marian had never been afraid of the sea. She did not know what was the matter with her now. The thought of entering the water gave her a frisson which was like a kind of sexual thrill, both unpleasant and distressingly agreeable" (31). Although fear arouses Marian, we also find that erotic feelings, in turn, empower her. In a scene with Violet Evercreech, she feels sexually excited, allowing the older woman to kiss her hair and brow. Leaving Violet's room, she feels more powerful: "A rapacious desire for action, for sensation, had been put into her by Violet. She felt so strong, so physically alive, she felt she could persuade anybody of anything" (145). Marian's submission to power eroticizes her, investing her with a sense of her own power and giving her the courage to try to free Hannah. This power is specious, however, since it is based on an act of submission.

Translating her sexual desire as a spiritual afflatus, Marian feels that she can destroy the story by taking the dead Hannah outside the estate walls: "She felt above all, as a sort of categorical imperative, the desire to set Hannah free, to smash up all her eerie magical surroundings, to let the fresh air in at last" (139). Subscribing to the myth of the place, Marian makes Hannah her own personal symbol—a Christ who offers the dream of resurrection in some "other" world. This other world—outside the walls of Gaze—is the same one from which Marian has escaped to find a new meaning in the book's symbolic one. Her attempt to rescue Hannah, then, becomes a symbolic effort to free herself from the restraints of the world outside of Gaze by destroying the boundaries of this allegorical world. The division between an inside world and an outside one is the framework of the myth—the borderlines of the symbolic order. Yet, by trying to free Hannah, Marian submits to the authoritative pattern of the story. After the aborted escape she realizes that her act of power was one of submission to Gerald's authority as he explains to her, "And that is the only way it can be here, because of the way the lives of several people are working themselves out, because of the pattern that is what has authority here, and absolute authority" (169).

Max's former student Effingham also enters the narrative from the outside world, where he serves as head of the department in a public service job. Reminiscent of

Jake's adulation of Hugo in Under the Net, Effingham "had taken Max without question as a great sage; and when he could himself still pass as a youth he had quite simply adored the older man" (75). After Max's retirement to Riders, Effingham has continued to visit him, and unlike Marian, already has a place in the drama. Upon his first visit to Riders he takes refuge in Gaze Castle after becoming lost in a storm. When he falls in love with Hannah, it disturbs the household at Riders but by his next visit, "the drama had taken on a certain settled form. Hannah was glad to see him, the Lejous were glad to see him; he had his place. He fell into accepting it. He was to be in love with Hannah, he was to be Hannah's servant, he was to come running back whenever he could, he was to be tolerated by everybody, he was to be harmless" (80). Although Effingham harbors thoughts of freeing Hannah, he acquiesces to his role, his harmless place, because he takes pleasure in the story of Hannah's imprisonment: "And as he sat in his office, dreaming of Hannah, he found himself feeling a certain strange guilty pleasure at the idea that she was, somehow, for him, shut up, reserved, sequestered" (80).

Having special access to Hannah's room, Effingham penetrates the inner sanctum of the castle, and by relating their conversations to Max he becomes a part of the philosopher's extended gaze. He, in fact, enjoys being closer to Hannah than Max and wants to be the liaison

between the estates. He realizes, however, that events may be changing after a conversation with Max where he gets the sense "that Max might open direct relations with Hannah. He appreciated, he enjoyed, the old man's interest in his story, but his enjoyment depended upon his retaining his own expertise, depended upon its remaining precisely a story" (113). When Effingham fears that Max might communicate with Hannah, usurping his position as pseudo-suitor, he agrees to help Marian with the escape, rationalizing his decision in this way: "But it suddenly seems to me that the whole structure is just too dangerous. There are these—awful cracks. And she might lose her nerve" (156). Fearing a crack in the structure of the story, Effingham wants take possession of Hannah before someone more powerful does—particularly Max.

Marian and Effingham's actions do lead to a collapse of the symbolic world but not in the way that they expect. The incident allows Gerald Scottow to more firmly entrench himself as the dominant figure of the household. When a telegram comes announcing the arrival of Hannah's husband, Gerald uses this foreboding news to assume the role of Hannah's protector. The members of the household watch obsequiously as Gerald carries the helpless Hannah to his room and locks the door. Several hours later he announces his plans to take Hannah away. Temporarily it appears that Gerald is the prince who will rescue the princess or awaken "the sleeping beauty," but this mythical rescue proves to be

a sham. After news arrives that Peter is not coming, Hannah tells Marian that she believes the cable was "a fake" (244). During this dialogue Marian realizes how Gerald has used the opportunity to make Hannah his personal symbol: "Gerald had, with one quick twist, as of one manipulating a whirling rope, bound her, enslaved her, a thousand times more: and then proposed that the situation should continue" (246). Gerald, by displacing Peter's power, replicates the events which lead to Hannah's imprisonment, creating a "new beginning" as Hannah describes it: "I have a feeling that if it means anything at all I must live it all through from the beginning, since everything up to now has been a false start. Now is the start" (247).

This conquering of an already dead image enacts a false resurrection which displaces one power system for another. This new myth or story replicates the old one; the only thing which changes is the power figure. During this last conversation, Hannah expresses regret for having become "A dream. Do you know what part I have been playing? That of God. And do you know what I have been really? Nothing, a legend" (248). As Christ-figure, Hannah realizes that her suffering has been for the sake of the group's "belief in the significance of my suffering" (249). To release herself from the deadly image, she shoots and kills Gerald, fulfilling her role as devil-woman, again becoming the threatening Lilith who defies patriarchal authority. The death of one tyrant only assures the return of the formerly

usurped one; once again Peter's homecoming is imminent. The double image of the spiritualized woman keeps the myth alive by demanding worship and conquest coequally; the sufferer and the criminal must exist in one image for power to perpetuate itself.

When Marian unlocks the door allowing Hannah to escape, she in effect allows her to kill the seductive reflection inherent in her dead image. Without an object—a center—the artifice of the gaze must collapse. She wonders if she has made the right choice: "When at last Hannah had wanted to break the mirror, to go out through the gate, ought she then to have been her jailer? It was not any more the old images of freedom which could move her now. It was Hannah's authority which had moved her, her sense, in the pathetic scene of her final imprisonment of Hannah's sovereignty, of her royal right to dispose of herself as she would" (283). By giving Hannah authority, Marian relinquishes her own submissive role, releasing herself and the other gazers from the spell of the story. By recognizing Hannah's authority, she no longer views her as a prisoner and thereby as a reflection of her own imprisoned condition. Marian's entrance into the story has caused a crack in the gaze structure, in the mirror which has kept Hannah captive.

When Hannah passes through the gates and falls to her death on the rocks below the house, she fulfills the prophetic legend of the narrative. Fairy tales must end,

though they leave their dead images for the possession of others. Hannah wills her story to Max, her absent other, who enters Gaze castle for the first time to claim her estate and to give her funeral speech. The powerful philosopher-God takes ultimate possession of the transcendent idea—"the dream of death begins."

Murdoch's use of the Gothic mode in The Unicorn parodies that convention, drawing attention to the placement of women in such a framework. My reading suggests that the parody destabilizes the representations of women, working counter to our efforts to place them. The novel asks that we interpret Hannah's symbolic significance through the gaze of the other characters. In this way the novel draws attention to the process of mythmaking, rather than simply offering up the symbolic for interpretation. This stylistic foregrounding implicates the reader in the gaze—as literary critics are voyeurs in their own right.

The Bell

In The Bell Murdoch creates another enclosed spiritual world, separated from an outside one of common, worldly activity. Imber Court, an estate that sits adjacent to an Abbey, harbors a lay community consisting primarily of people aspiring to live a spiritual life. Michael, the owner of the estate, has returned to his former family home to establish the community. The Abbess had suggested that he make the Court "the home of a permanent lay community

attached to the Abbey, a 'buffer state', as she puts it, between the Abbey and the world, a reflection, a benevolent and useful parasite, an intermediary form of life" (81). Michael, "who recognized spiritual authority when he saw it," (82) viewed the Abbess' suggestion as a "command" and began to make plans to create such a place.

The Abbey sequesters an enclosed order of nuns who have vowed never to leave "the house where they take their first vows" (64). To the community members, the nuns' self-chosen imprisonment represents a transcendence manifested through sacrifice. As parasites, this community feeds off the suffering of women who, as "brides" of God, have foresworn the sensual world. Further, they enclose themselves within the walls of the estate, imitating the nuns' austerity. Existing between the walls of the Abbey and the corrupt outside world, Imbers occupies an in-between space, a "buffer state" as the Abbess would have it. It acts, then, as an additional wall to protect the sacred world of the Abbey from impure forces, while attracting potential converts to the religious life.

The nuns' self-imprisonment gives them saintly status. In the spiritual hierarchy they are superior and superiority, in this case, breeds power. Like Hannah, their power arises from the purification of women, which depends on their incarceration. A "high wall," a line of trees and a large lake separate the Abbey from the rest of the estate—multiple boundaries which resist violation, creating

a fortress against the evil forces outside. A long building attached to the wall allows the only access to the nuns where they enter parlours where they "occasionally come to speak to people from outside" (65). The parlours contain three barriers: a gauze screen which opens up to reveal iron bars behind which the nun sits to speak with her visitor, and another gauze screen which "obscures" the room behind her (65). In the visitors' chapel, an "enormous grill" stretches "from floor to ceiling" separating it from the main Abbey chapel. Worshippers face a raised altar which conceals the nuns on the other side.

Such efforts to obscure the nuns' sanctuary not only add to its mystification by keeping the purified hidden, but also suggest that looking upon the sacred place is a form of violation. While the distancing gaze in The Unicorn focuses on the multiplicitous image of Hannah, in The Bell, gazing upon the inner sanctuary of the Abbey is an intrusion into the spiritual, and thus a violation of boundaries. Non-gazing, then, through various methods of obfuscation, takes on spiritual significance. The inability to see inside the spiritual enclave makes it more secretive and thus seductive.

This symbolically ordered world is apparently undisturbed until Dora arrives at Imbers. Her husband Paul, an art historian, has come to the estate to study old manuscripts, "early chronicles of the nunnery," dating back to 1400. Having been separated from Paul, she decides to

return to him: "Dora Greenfield left her husband because she was afraid of him. She decided six months later to return to him for the same reason" (7). Dora's surrender to Paul's power parallels the nuns' sacrifice to God. Imbers represents for her the restrictions of marriage. By reuniting with her husband, she surrenders her power to someone "whose conception of life excluded or condemned her deepest urges. That was marriage, thought Dora, to be enclosed in the aims of another" (18). Like the nuns, Dora freely chooses to sacrifice her will to the desires of another. Paul is indeed her God and marriage is a denial or repression of her own personal power. While the nuns give up sexuality for the spiritual life, Dora surrenders herself to the sexual power of another, marrying "because of the demonic intensity of Paul's desire for her" (8).

Paul's attraction for the submissive, entrapped woman, evident in his interest in the nunnery manuscripts, is paralleled by his need for Dora's submission. Engrossed in ancient history, which chronicles womens' enslavement, Paul finds pleasure studying such oppression, as exemplified in his fascination with the legend of the bell. During the 14th-century the Bishop put a curse on the Abbey after one of the nuns failed to confess that she had taken a lover. Due to the curse, the bell flew out of the tower and into the lake, whereupon the guilty nun drowned herself in the same lake. When Paul tells Dora the legend of the bell he becomes sexually aroused: "Dora realized obscurely that in

telling her the story he had released in himself the desire for her which had been quiescent before" (44). When "the violence of the tale" arouses Paul, he in effect wants to drown Dora who is guilty of not conforming to his perfect image of womanhood; though she succumbs to the strictures of marriage, she does not fulfill the wifely role that he has designed for her.

Paul's dictatorial attitude about Dora's behavior suggests that he wants her to imitate the nuns' perfection and purity. We find, however, that Paul is attracted to Dora not only for her submissiveness, but also because of her failure to conform to his demands. Her undistinguished hereditary background and lack of the cultivation required in his social artistic milieu renders her imperfect. Her liveliness and eccentric behavior becomes a source of irritation to him: "As a child-wife she irritated him continually by the vitality for which he had married her" (10). Dora's individuality and nonconformity represents a challenge to Paul, increasing his desire for her. When she submits to him, he becomes all the more powerful because he has subdued the tainted female who poses a threat to his ordered life. Similarly, the Imbers' community finds Dora's behavior heretical, and they attempt to bring her into their order by forcing her to conform to the life there—they too desire her submission.

Even in her surrender, Dora resists the power of these forces. Her cynicism toward the community and the Abbey

reflects her self-doubts about her imprisonment. She is uncomfortable praying in the chapel because of her high heels, and she sees the chapel as "harboring an alien rite, half sinister, half ludicrous" (34). Within a short time of her arrival at Imbers, she attends a church service where she is scrutinized by a nun and instructed to cover her head by Mrs. Marks, to which she responds by putting a "not very clean handkerchief on her head" (34). These examples suggest that Dora's worldliness threatens to defile this sacred world. The pain which she experiences from kneeling in the shoes effectively punishes her for such worldly accouterment. Uncomfortable with these religious rites, Dora leaves the service, removing her shoes to walk barefoot along the lake, escaping the stultifying ritual and the pain caused by kneeling. When the members discover she has lost her shoes, they begin a search party. The lost shoes represent Dora's lost spiritual condition, as suggested by Father Bob when the shoes are found: "There is more rejoicing over what is lost and found than over what has never gone astray" (39). Dora indeed offers a challenge to those who would hope to save her.

Mrs. Marks begins working on Dora's conversion the morning after her arrival. When Dora puts flowers in her room, Mrs. Marks looks at her "censoriously" and asks her to remove them because of "the rules of the house" (61). The "wild flowers" which make up Dora's "nosegay" threaten the somber, rule-bound spiritual existence of the community. In

another example, Mrs. Mark refuses to answer Dora's question regarding her past, explaining that because of their "religious rules," they never discuss their past lives and allow no gossip. This silencing has the effect of making the spiritual aspirant powerless, insuring that she remains occupied with the contemplation of spiritual matters. In effect, the aspirant should erase worldly thoughts, sacrificing her identity as she becomes one with the group. Mrs. Marks does suggest, however, that Dora speak with one of the nuns regarding her life, hinting that the newcomer might need to confess. Alarmed at such a proposal, Dora refuses: "She'd see the place in hell before she'd let a nun meddle with her mind and heart" (66). By resisting the submissive confessional, Dora refuses to relinquish the details of her disorderly, impure life for the purpose of sanctification.

As the story progresses, Dora struggles harder to gain her own personal sense of freedom and to resist her subjugation. She wants to free herself from her oppressive marriage and the symbolic world of Imbers which mimics the strictures of that marriage. Slowly, she begins to realize that her sensuality marks her as a guilty nun and she rebels against the community's efforts to save her. Her response to Catherine, the postulant who is soon to enter the convent, demonstrates not only her fear of entrapment but an awareness of the potential danger at Imbers. She finds her, for example, "a little menacing" (38). Through Dora's

recognition of the threatening nature of the religious symbols at Imbers, she slowly begins to recognize her own surrender of power and begins to try to regain her freedom. By retrieving the bell from the lake, she rebels against the authority of the Bishop's curse, hoping to save herself from the fate of the unfaithful nun.

The legend of the bell exemplifies the kind of mythical stories which support and maintain the religious community. Regarding the symbolism of the bell, Debra Johnson states: "The bell itself changes its significance as symbolic object according to the characters who respond to it" (84). But for all the characters the bell represents power. For the spiritual aspirants it represents the powerful force of spiritual judgment—a sign of death which threatens those who like the nun are tempted to violate the codes of self-sacrifice. Like the nuns, the bell takes on symbolic power because it is hidden and inaccessible: the question remains, for example, whether it is actually in the lake. James, one of the most powerful members of the group, is particularly fascinated with the image of the bell. In one of his lengthy sermons, he uses the image of the bell as an example of the kind of innocence one should value and nurture as a spiritual objective. Innocence, he claims, brings "a deeper and more precise knowledge" than experience (135). Innocence, in his estimation, requires truthfulness and bearing witness, qualities represented by the image of the bell: "A bell is made to speak out. What would be the

value of a bell which was never rung? It rings out clearly, it bears witness, it cannot speak without seeming like a call, a summons . . . All that it is is plain and open; and if it is moved it must ring" (135). James' sermon indicates the kind of witnessing which he values as a spiritual ideal, a summons which he hopes will seduce others to join the spiritual life. The name of the bell, Gabriel, also supports the notion of the bell as messenger. For James, the bell represents the compelling influence of the language which embodies spiritual laws. His call for innocence exemplifies the kind of seductive rhetoric which maintains such communities. Innocent followers are much more pliable and impressionable: they are, in fact, easier to dominate.

The innocence to which James alludes must also refer to the sexual denial and purity practiced by the nuns. The ring of the bell (its simplistic speech) represents the symbolizing impetus of the community's rhetoric which attempts to murder desire with a counter-seduction, promising a higher knowledge through the denial of sexual urges. As James asks the aspirants to become like a bell (symbolic and compelling), he bids them enter the symbolic order to become an image, an empty sign. Such symbolic ordering through language is required for the dissemination of power, preventing the collapse of the boundaries which contain spiritual ideals.

The arrival of a new bell constitutes the reentrenchment of the old order of religious myth. It is

supplementary, a double sign which through copying, reinforces the perpetuation of dead (drowned) images. This doubling acts as a supplementary barrier, further insulating the Abbey and community. Religious symbols may appear to erase sexual desire but can only mask it. Such concealment is tenuous, however, as powerful sexual feelings underly the very foundation of the community. Michael, for example, has converted to the spiritual life in order to absolve himself of past sins. While serving as a schoolmaster, he was dismissed from his post for having become romantically involved with Nick, Catherine's brother. Troubled by his homosexual feelings and still in love with Nick, he hopes to escape his dilemma. Unable to come to terms with his homosexual feelings, he chooses to love the only women he can—asectal ones. He finds Dora, for example, "crude and exotic" (121): "she epitomized everything he didn't care for about women" (128). It is this female crudeness that Michael tries to expunge in his dedication to the Abbey; the nuns are not really women to Michael, they are an image through which he channels his sexual desire in the hopes of purifying it. His desire for the spiritualized woman masks his sexual desire for men, revealing a double intention. The presence of both Catherine and her twin Nick in the community demonstrates Michael's sexual confusion. When Catherine enters the convent to become a bride of God, his sexual feelings for Nick will be, through her symbolic sacrifice, hidden in the dark sanctuary of the Abbey.

Michael's efforts to quell his sexual desires prove ineffectual, however. Finding himself attracted to young Toby, he gets swept away by his passion and kisses the boy one night. Trying to interpret his feelings in a spiritual way, he justifies his affection for the boy: "It could not be that God intended such a spring of love to be quenched utterly. There must be, there must be a way in which it could be made a power for good" (157). Michael's attempt to purify his sexual feelings by interpreting them as an act of goodness indicates the bogus nature of his religious beliefs which mask his true feelings by providing godly sanction and justification. His immersion in the spiritual life is a masquerade, concealing his powerful sexual urges which he considers sinful. Peter Conradi claims that Michael's religious urge is not "just sex": "Of course it is sex. It is also religion. Murdoch's desublimations are offered to us not so much to 'unmask' the idea of virtue as bogus as to demonstrate the mysterious inaccessibility of virtue, and the dangers of too swift or un-self-sceptical an ascent" (116). Although I agree that Michael has religious urges, I suggest that he attempts to conceal his sexual inclinations within the community's religious imagery and rituals.

His encounter with Toby, however, begins the boy's rebellion and doubts about the religious life, awakening sexual feelings and causing Toby to question his own sexual preference. After a discussion with Michael, who apologizes and asks him "to bury the matter" (170), Toby enters the

visitor's chapel where "He pondered for a while rather generally upon the conception of Woman" (174), then finds himself aroused by the image of Dora Greenfield. This fantasy is interrupted by: "the sound of movement within the nuns' chapel. Soft footsteps were heard and the frou-frou of heavy skirts. Toby jumped up in alarm. It must be time for sext" (175). For Toby, sext is sex. The symbolic value of the nuns and their ritual begins to lose sway as he views them as sexually provocative. Stumbling out of the chapel, he has the urge to do "something violent." He enacts this violence by climbing over the Abbey wall and entering a door which opens into the Abbey cemetery. There he encounters a group of nuns and is approached by one who treats him kindly and attributes his intrusion to his youthfulness: "Besides, we have a special rule which says that children can sometimes come into the enclosure" (179-80). Of course Toby's act is not a childish one and is, in fact, a declaration of his manhood. This intrusion is not only sexual, but is an act of violence against the symbols of the community. By invading the enclosure he transgresses the mysterious boundary which separates spirit from flesh. Prompted by "a feeling of the utter messiness of everything" (175), Toby rebels against these holy boundaries: his confusion reflects the immanent disarray hidden beneath the ordered pronouncements of spiritual law.

When Michael kisses Toby he brings about the dissolution of his community. No longer subservient to

spiritual authority, Toby gives way to his sexual feelings for Dora. When he tells Dora that he has discovered the lost bell in the lake, he foreswears James' language of innocence and gives voice to his own desires. By making her his confidante in the matter, he falls in league with the community heretic. When Dora hears the news of the lost bell, she finds her own personal symbol of the power which she has lost in her marriage. Upon hearing the story she "was suddenly filled with the uneasy elation of one to whom great power has been given which he does not yet know how to use" (197). Soon, however, Dora decides how to use this power: she convinces Toby to join with her in secretly retrieving the bell and substituting it for the new bell. When Toby has doubts about their ability to accomplish this feat, Dora insists that they can "make a miracle" (198). With this new feeling of supernatural power Dora becomes the evil opponent of the godly, reminiscent of Marian's decision to oppose Gerald Scottow: "After all, and after her own fashion, she would fight. In this holy community she would play the witch" (199).

When Toby and Dora pull the bell from the lake they try to achieve freedom from spiritual confines by becoming sexually powerful, yet they interpret this sexuality in a spiritual way. After retrieving the bell Toby feels a "miraculous strength . . . He was a hero, a king. He fell upon Dora" (221). Caught up in this passion, they fall into the mouth of the bell causing it to ring. The ringing of

the bell then becomes a cry for a sexual freedom which has spiritual significance, an expression of power which depends on the subjugation of another. Later, when alone, Dora examines the bell and apparently becomes aroused by it, realizing that "she was afraid of it" (266) and "She had thought to be its master" (267). Dominated by the bell, she begins frantically ringing it—the ring this time is the self-same call of passion that has defined her life with Paul, one of mastery. The bell finally speaks but not James' simple language. It witnesses to the will to power which underlies both spiritual and sexual desire. As Dorothy Winsor explains, "The bell is associated with more than sexuality, however, for it is also encircled with pictures of the life of Christ . . . The old bell thus represents sexuality which has been directed to the outside world through the transforming powers of religion and art" (124-5).

The baptismal-drowning scene at the book's conclusion brings to the surface the multiplicity of hidden motives and desires within the community. Nick has sabotaged the bridge over which the new bell passes as it enters the Abbey, causing it to fall into the lake. To Catherine this incident appears as an anathema. Considering herself unfit for the convent because of her hidden desires for Michael, she enters the lake to drown herself, followed by Dora, who tries to save her. As they are drowning, one of the nuns then jumps into the lake and saves them followed by two men

of the community who aid in the rescue. Ironically, the spiritual aspirants save the two lost women from drowning in their respective myths: Catherine is saved from the clutches of the convent and Dora from the mastery of her marriage.

The peal of the old bell causes the collapse of the community not simply because it is a symbol of sexuality, but because of the instability of its function in the power system. Symbols speak the language of those who ring them, resisting the meaning which they are meant to uphold. As Foucault suggests, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance" (101).

At the end of the book we see this particular spiritual authority demolished when Toby reveals Michael's secret. Imbers, no longer the symbol of purity, must disband. Having decided to leave Paul, Dora remains at Imbers and is the last to leave. During a quiet moment before her departure she takes the rowboat out into the lake. Her indifferent response to the ringing of the bell is in contrast to her first feelings of alarm when she entered the place: "From the tower above her the bell began to ring for Nones. She scarcely heard it. Already for her it rang from another world" (315). No longer compelled by this

messenger, it appears that Dora has resisted at least the mastery of this powerful symbol.

In response to A. S. Byatt's criticism of Murdoch's use of the bell as symbol, Debra Johnson responds by pointing out that from a "female-centered" or "Dora-centered" perspective the bell functions as a liberating symbol for Dora. As she explains, "The ringing of the bell is only one of a number of consciously [her emphasis] symbolic actions which Dora takes in an attempt to resolve her predicament in relation to her husband who doesn't respect her and to the Imber community by whom she feels casually judged" (82). From this point of view the symbolic bell as well as the allegorical design of the novel self-consciously reflect upon the oppression inherent in certain cultural institutions which enslave both women and men. Yet the novel clearly points out how important the spiritual image of woman is to such oppression, presenting Dora as an example of one who struggles to free herself from that confining image.

A Severed Head

In A Severed Head Murdoch examines the mythical thinking of Martin Lynch-Gibbon, a self-centered, middle-class wine merchant and the novel's narrator. A Severed Head takes place within the environs of London, an apparently secular setting which contrasts with the enclosed spiritual worlds of the other two novels. Within this

setting, however, Martin establishes his own mythical view of the world, investing his reality with spiritual meaning and encapsulating the female other with his gaze. In contrast to The Unicorn the first-person male narrator is the sole gazer whose depiction of the novel's female characters conforms to his particular fantasy world. His narrative tells the story of his love for three women. As the book opens we find Martin content in his relationships with two women—his wife Antonia and his mistress Georgie. Martin's satisfaction derives from the dichotomized views he has of women and the power which such a view affords him.

For the purpose of his gaze Martin sets scenes where his mythical dramas can transpire. His affair with Georgie unfolds as a drama as he buys her the accoutrements of a stereotypical mistress: "I loved to give Georgie outrageous things, absurd garments and gew-gaws which I could not possibly have given Antonia, barbarous necklaces and velvet pants and purple underwear and black openwork tights which drove me mad." Houses and rooms provide enclosures for the objects of Martin's gaze, setting the scene of desire. For example, "Georgie's room, a large untidy bed-sitting room which looked out onto what was virtually an alley-way in the proximity of Covent Garden, was full of things which I had given her" (7). Georgie's untidiness and her role as mistress places her in a position outside the comfortable bourgeois world that Martin shares with Antonia. She is not only forbidden, but like Dora, does not conform to the

social properties of Martin's bourgeois existence. The "impermanent jumble" of her room represents for Martin "the very image and symbol of my relation to Georgie, my mode of possessing her, or more precisely the way in which I, as it were, failed to possess her" (8). This jumbled, uncivilized scene, which Martin creates for the purpose of his fantasy, is a taboo scene where Georgie represents the alluring, unforbidden woman.

Martin explains that he didn't possess Georgie because "Georgie was simply there" (8). We realize, however, that Georgie is simply (for Martin) not there. The Georgie enframed within Martin's gaze is his creation, a fabrication imbuing him with a sense of his own power. To maintain the fantasy, his creation must remain hidden and secretive, as must the scene of the liaison dangereuse. Martin describes this place: "Her room seemed a subterranean place, remote, enclosed, hidden" (12). To keep his desire alive and thereby his power, Martin must keep the affair secret. He justifies the need for secrecy to Georgie: "Remember the legend of Psyche, whose child, if she told about her pregnancy, would be mortal, whereas if she kept silent it would be a god" (13). Martin uses such mythological allusions throughout the book, suggesting that his perceptions of women are based on archetypal models. In this way Murdoch shows how men's perceptions of women resemble legends of antiquity. Women's silence, as in Psyche's case, is associated with godliness, and the same

notion underlies Martin's rationale which amounts to a kind of emotional blackmail—that is, he wants to keep Georgie silent and thus submissive.

Martin finds a different kind of comfort in the expensive, orderly home he shares with Antonia, as exemplified in the description of his living room which his wife has decorated for the Christmas season: "Antonia's decorations combined a traditional gaiety with the restrained felicity which marked all her domestic arrangements" (23). When Martin returns to his traditional and restrained bourgeois home, he crosses an imaginary line dividing the two worlds, a demarcation that divides his view of the female other. Georgie's dark, subterranean room contrasts sharply with his living room at Hereford Square where "A bright fire of coal and wood was glowing and murmuring in the grate, and intermittent lamps lit with a soft gold the long room" (23). To have a dark, forbidden affair Martin must have the contrasting light of marriage vows. Further, when he married Antonia he married an "eccentric society beauty" who came from a distinguished family. The fact that Antonia moved in "a fashionable society" made their wedding "a sensation" (16), hence, their marriage has been in the limelight.

Centered within the social context of Martin's gaze, Antonia appears golden, flooded with exalted light: "and indeed 'golden' is the epithet for her appearance. She is like some rich gilded object over which time has cast the

moonlit pallor of a gentle veneer" (17). He goes on to compare her to "the water-haunted sunlight on an old pavement in Venice" (17). With these descriptions Martin romanticizes Antonia as a figure of spiritual goodness, in contrast to his view of Georgie. Wealth and status, in Martin's schema, exemplify the power of good in his life, while the economically deficient purlieu where his affair takes place represents the antithetical evil that completes his dichotomous world view. Martin clearly categorizes his world as black and white, right and wrong, good and bad—his gaze divides the female other, doubling his own sense of power.

When Antonia announces that she has fallen in love with Palmer, her psychiatrist, and that she wants a divorce, the boundaries which have enclosed and divided Martin's fantasy collapse. As a result the objects in his life do not appear the same as before: "The familiar world of ways and objects within which I had lived for so long received me no more; and our lovely house had put on suddenly the air of a superior antique shop. The things in it no longer cohered" (37-8). The logic of Martin's divided gaze disintegrates when Antonia moves out of their home as the "things" in his life "become the sad symbols of a loss" (38), a loss even more profound because Antonia is a mother figure. She is five years older than he, and he finds her aging face attractive (17). During her sessions with Palmer, Antonia has realized that their marriage has been based on this

mother-child relationship: "It's partly my being so much older and being a sort of mother to you" (29).

When Martin loses Antonia, he also loses his attraction for Georgie. With this new development he must consider the possibility of marrying his mistress, an event which, by raising her status and eliminating secrecy, would diminish his sexual desire for her. Antonia, on the other hand, becomes more alluring and he even finds himself in love with her: "The scene with Antonia had left me stiff and weary, as if I had been beaten, or had come a very long way. I was by now in a state which could only be described as being in love" (61-2). When Antonia leaves Martin, she becomes a figure of power to whom Martin willingly submits. From this previous description, one might think that he had sex with Antonia rather than a mere conversation, and further, that he had taken a passive role. We find that he indeed wants to be mastered as Georgie has surmised: "The trouble with you, Martin, is that you are always looking for a master" (5).

Martin's association of love with the feeling of having been beaten suggests a masochistic pleasure in being the victim. When his world collapses, he transfers his desire to the more powerful Antonia, expressing his love through "acquiescence in her will to keep that thread unbroken between us. At the same time, to consent to this was torture and I felt the tender bond like a strangler's rope" (62). With the disintegration of his world, Martin

willingly plays the victim to maintain contact with this mother-wife. His desire to remain attached to Antonia requires that he maintain a friendly relationship with Palmer as well. He realizes that he not only needs Antonia but he needs "them" (62) and wants some "reassurance" from Palmer. While doing so is necessarily painful, he acquiesces to their power and plays the child's role, running errands for them and playing the dupe. If Antonia is the mother then Palmer must be the father, doubling Martin's attraction for the role of victim in their power relations. The attraction is not only Oedipal; however, he loves his father, too. Though he appears to be accepting the situation he harbors spiteful, childish thoughts about the two and in fact wants to get back at them. Like a child who has lost his mother (to his father, perhaps) he feels angry: "Yet violence, veiled with misery, moved within" (62).

Martin accepts this submissive role not only to keep his world connected but also to regain his power. By killing the pair with kindness, he hopes to put everything back in its place. When Martin agrees to do Antonia a favor by picking up Palmer's sister, Honor Klein, at the train station, it is an unpleasant and inconvenient task to him but he views it as a way of getting back at the two: "this was after all the only thing I could do just now to spite Antonia and Palmer. It was for this moment my only weapon" (62). At the train station Martin descends to hell, finding

the appropriate image of darkness to assist him with his violent intentions. He refers to the place as "an image of hell" and describes it thus: "Several middle-aged women passed by with strained preoccupied faces and rapidly vanished. Everyone was hurrying and everyone looked ill. It was the Inferno indeed" (63). That Martin would find middle-aged women in hell is not surprising—beneath the veil of worship resides the feeling that Antonia is evil because she is an adulteress; her image of goodness conceals his obverse feelings of repulsion and fear of the female other.

Honor Klein appears to Martin as a kind of powerful avenger from hell who can wreak havoc on her brother's relationship with Antonia. He sees in her all the dark, terrifying qualities that make women powerful. As a Medusa figure, she is the monster he needs to carry out his plan, finding her stare "animal-like and repellent" (64). When she grunts in reply to his question, he says to himself: "I don't care what this object thinks of me" (65). Martin's conception of Honor as an animal-object correlates with his images of the other women in his life. He objectifies them for his particular fantasy needs of the moment—in this case, he needs a beastly middle-aged woman. With this new spiritual monster Martin begins to feel more powerful and the characters in his drama grow more mythical and godly. When he and Honor arrive at Pelham Square, Antonia and Palmer "look like deities" and Honor appears as "a powerful

captain." As Honor stands in the hallway he notices the Samurai sword above her head, suggesting that he must sever the head of the monster to recover his honor.

Like Perseus of the old myth Martin seeks godly power in beheading the Medusa. What the head signifies to Martin is questionable. His brother, Alexander, offers one interpretation: "Freud on Medusa. The head can represent the female genitals, feared not desired" (50). I suggest, however, that to Martin the head represents the spiritualized female genitals, both feared and desired. As Honor becomes more threatening, Martin's repulsion is mixed with physical desire as she comes to represent a god-demon with both spiritual and sexual power. Feeling the reemergence of his powerful two-fold gaze, Martin envisions cutting Honor in half to reestablish order in his life. When he violently attacks the Medusa in the wine cellar, he symbolically rapes her. This aggression proves to be ineffectual; however, it only increases his desire for her, as she remains the most powerful figure in the novel.

With her evil eye Honor severs the lives of the other characters, taking on the role of an executioner who effectively beheads the other characters. She demonstrates her beheading abilities to Martin when she severs the napkin with the Japanese sword. Hidden in the original myth we find a double threat which puts into question Alexander's Freudian interpretation of the Medusa. Honor begins to resemble a hermaphrodite who wields the sexual weaponry of

both sexes. While Steven Cohan claims that Honor's "figure epitomizes all that is inherently mysterious and contingent about the female" (230), this view is complicated by her similarity to the two threatening men in Martin's life whose occupations mark them as "headhunters." Martin's brother Alexander sculpts heads and Palmer is a psychiatrist. Alexander has plagued Martin's life by seducing his women and Palmer's psychiatry has in effect taken Antonia away from him. As an anthropologist, Honor also belongs in this category of headhunters who disturb the order of his life. For example, when Honor discloses Martin's secret affair, Georgie ends up in the arms of his brother, then finally with Palmer. Similarly, Honor's incestuous relationship with her brother leads to Antonia's leaving Palmer and returning to Martin only to leave him for his brother Alexander. These examples suggest that Martin's dichotomized view of women conceals a deeper attraction for men who, as in the original myth, have the power to decapitate the dangerous female.

Ultimately, Honor does prove to be the spiritual monster who assists Martin in destroying Palmer and Antonia's relationship. But the magnificence of Honor's power causes him to transfer his affections from these other women to her larger, more compelling image. He finds both darkness and light consummate in Honor who is infinitely desireable because she possesses the supernatural powers of the prophetess. Honor describes his fascination for her:

"Because of what I am and because of what you saw I am a terrible object of fascination for you. I am a severed head such as primitive tribes and old alchemists used to use, anointing it with oil and putting a morsel of gold upon its tongue to make it utter prophecies. And who knows but that long acquaintance with a severed head might not lead to strange knowledge" (221). What Martin saw was Honor in bed with her brother. By gazing upon the incest scene Martin has gained secret knowledge which he attributes to the arcane Honor, both his executioner and his severed head.

In his reading of the novel, Steven Cohan finds A Severed Head "funny but also rather disturbing in its uncritical acceptance of Martin's sexist fantasy of woman as the taboo he wants to master" (231). Although he admits that Murdoch satirizes both men and women in the novel, Cohan surmises that "she lets his [Martin's] women remain characterized entirely in terms of his fantasies of the illicit and the desired" (234), contradicting his own thesis that Murdoch creates male narrators of Martin's ilk with the purpose of exposing their "egoism" (223). The book's satire of such egoism depends on Martin's fantasies about women as revealed through his personal narrative. Richard Kane proposes that when Honor returns to Martin at the end of the book that "The demonic Honor Klein has done her didactic work and can now confront Martin as a real woman. The proof of Martin's growth lies in the ultimately perceptive narration he has just composed" (43). We do find Martin at

the end of the book experiencing "the first moment of some entirely new era" (244), but we also find him worshiping Honor's closeness. The union of Honor and Martin seems to me to be a totally ironic gesture on Murdoch's part, a continuation of the myth rather than an indication that the characters have suddenly become part of a real world. Having recovered his honor, Martin's narrative-fantasy continues with some question as to whether he will survive this union with the Medusa.

CHAPTER THREE REACHING OUT TO THE DEAD

"'We live with death. Oh with pain, yes—but really—with death.'" (Nuns and Soldiers 356)

The characters who appear to achieve some kind of freedom in Murdoch's fictional worlds do so through a change in their perceptions, allowing them to escape a particular mythical view—as we have seen in Dora's and Jake's case, for example. We could define freedom in this context, then, as letting go of certain beliefs which legitimize our perceptions of reality. But we do not relinquish beliefs without adopting others, a process that keeps us perpetually bound to one cultural ideology or another. If this is the case, then do we have the freedom to choose a particular belief system or are we simply trapped within the determinism of our shifting values? Murdoch's fictional schemas, it seems to me, propose such a question and offer an answer as well. Her novels suggest that we can reformulate our beliefs, creating what I will refer to as revisionary myths. This view implies that one myth is better or more productive than another—an assumption that has ethical ramifications, evident in Murdoch's unflattering portrayal of solipsists and of those who deny others' reality. The previous chapters have at least indirectly

identified the nature of those ethical beliefs. In this chapter, I will use the term myth not only to evaluate the nature of Murdoch's fictional worlds, but to refer to a particular ideological bias of the novel as genre. I will consider how the seduction of the novel's design can revise our perception, offering a revisionary myth to supplant the old one. With this approach I can examine Murdoch's fiction with an eye to uncovering an underlying myth in her novels, while considering whether her fictional revisionism suggests that one myth is more productive than another.

I have already noted that Murdoch warns us of the dangers of solipsism and the denial of the reality of others. This ethicalviewpoint asks for a revision of perception, a moral imperative requiring greater empathy and compassion for others. I am not concerned here with identifying the ethical beliefs embodied in these notions but with considering what authority, if any, supports these beliefs. Beliefs, it would seem, go hand in hand with judgments, a supposition which introduces ideas of right and wrong and the possibility of some original, perhaps transcendent, source of knowledge. Further, we cannot formulate beliefs without reading signs—that is, interpreting the variety of tropes which constitute our lives. Looking for signs is a search for belief or certainty, and the interpretation of signs supposes a message which comes from beyond the sign. We can view the form (or de-sign) of the novel in the same way: both writer

and reader reach out to something beyond. Of course, one can believe that no meaning exists beyond the novel's signs or design, but this idea still constitutes a belief which requires looking beyond the sign. The following interpretation of Murdoch's The Good Apprentice has two purposes: first, to show how death functions as a master trope in this novel, giving authority to Murdoch's revisionary myth; second, to show how myth in the novel depends on a relationship with death.

Calling Out To The Dead

For one moment she felt that if they both got up, here, now on the lawn, and demanded an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexplicable, said it with violence, as two fully equipped human beings from whom nothing should be hid might speak, then, beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape; if they shouted loud enough Mrs. Ramsay would return. "Mrs. Ramsay!" she said aloud, "Mrs. Ramsay!" The tears ran down her face. (Woolf 268)

The above lines from Virginia Woolf's To The Lighthouse are the woeful sentiments of Lily, who is rather belatedly overcome with anguish over the death of her friend Mrs. Ramsay. These lines express the painful feelings of loss brought on by the death of another—the emptiness and the desire for the return of the loved one. The entire passage, which covers several pages, is a poignant one as Lily continues to call out to her dead friend. In Murdoch's The Good Apprentice we find a similar impulse in characters who call out to dead others, desiring to fill up the space left by the absent one. The gap or distance between the dead and

living appears to them as a seductive abyss which can be bridged by calling out to the dead or by listening to the dead speak. In this way the characters carry on a dialogue with the dead, a conversation with the void. This colloquy becomes an act of interpretation as the image of ghosts represents signs of some mystical or philosophical belief. The characters' mythmaking produces a variety of stories or interpretations, which have in common the impulse to reify dead others by textualizing them or inscribing them with meaning. The dead image, then, becomes an absent other who speaks metaphysically from beyond the grave.

Communication with the dead reveals a desire to breach the distance between the living presence of consciousness and the ethereal presence of the other. With this notion, I propose that we can use such a reading of The Good Apprentice as an analogue for reading the novel in general, viewing it as a seance, a summoning of the dead, and/or a prayer—speaking to the unrepresentable. In this way, all novels engage in mythmaking. In this chapter I will suggest that narratives erupt from the absence left by death in the signs and images created by loss. I will show how the characters' numerous myths all depend on a relationship with the dead who take on figurative significance. After this analysis I will look into the myth that arises from the cumulation of all of these stories—the central death myth of The Good Apprentice.

Edward: "I'm a stinking corpse." "I am dead. I am the walking dead."

Murdoch's novels are populated with the dead and dying. Three of her latest ones begin with the death of an important figure whose absence invades the ontological presence of the living. With this device Murdoch incorporates philosophical ideas into her fiction, as her characters suffer from the loss of loved ones. As the characters attempt to communicate with the dead and/or live with their images, they formulate myths about reality through interpretations which evoke an unknowable or absolute value. The Good Apprentice begins with the freakish death of Mark Wilsdam, who jumps from a window after his friend Edward Baltram tricks him into taking a hallucinogen by surreptitiously placing it in a sandwich. When Edward leaves Mark in the apartment for a short while to visit a young woman, his friend leaps from the window, apparently believing that he is flying to meet God. Edward's painful struggle to forgive himself for this tragic occurrence is a central focus of the novel as the incident evokes the hidden ghosts of other characters.

The losses suffered by the characters involve them in a process of imagining the dead, an imaginative act characterized by enacting some kind of figurative death. Edward, for example, envisions himself as a corpse, or one of the living dead. He tells his brother Stuart, for example: "I'm a stinking corpse. Particle by particle I'm

going bad" (44). Experiencing a simulated death, Edward's identity disintegrates as does his perception of himself as alive. In this mental state, he leaves his present life and enters a simulated afterlife. Descending into hell, he begins a spiritual journey, seeking forgiveness for his sin, and thereby redemption. In this hell he thwarts the efforts of those who offer him solace. While others attempt to reach him, he carries on an internal monologue in which he punishes himself with regrets. These regrets become like prayers to the silent Mark:

"Oh my dear, oh my darling, my poor lost one, my poor dead one, come to me, forgive me, I'm sorry, oh my love, my love, I'm so sorry, help me, help me." So he prayed to Mark. A language he would never have used to Mark alive now seemed the only way to speak to Mark dead, to Mark's image or ghost which was now permanently present, a part of every thought, in the chamber of his mind. (11)

Edward punishes himself through the continual repetition of such self-accusations: "and sometimes he found himself, even when he was not alone, starting to recite them aloud as a mechanical litany, and weirdly smiling when the agony was worst" (12). Such conversations offer Edward some refuge, but he still finds them "one-sided." His longing for a reply leads him further into the darkness of his psyche as he seeks signs and voices from this underworld. He finds this sign (and the possibility of voices) in a card which appears magically with these words: "DO THE DEAD WISH TO SPEAK TO YOU?" (49). Interpreting the card as a message from the beyond, Edward attends a seance where he receives

the summons which carries him further into his imaginative hell. Murdoch designs Edward's journey according to the model of Christian salvation, as is evident in the opening lines of the novel:

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

These were not perhaps the actual words which Edward Baltram uttered to himself on the occasion of his momentous and mysterious summons, yet their echo was not absent even then, and later he repeated them often. (1)

Although Edward is not religious, we find that much of his internal monologue echoes the Christian mythos: his hell is a Christian one complete with its ideology of guilt, sin, and forgiveness. The summons refers to a voice which speaks to him at the seance saying: "Edward; and then, 'Come to your father. Come home, my son" (62). Although Edward has two fathers—a stepfather and a biological one whom he saw rarely as a young child—he wonders whether "he were being summoned by a dead father" (64). This possibility sends him on a search for the biological father, Jesse Baltram, who becomes the savior or Christ (Jesse/Jesus) who will redeem him.

Edward's fascination with hallucinogens has in a curious way caused his predicament. When he gives the drug to his friend who has previously refused it, he takes it upon himself to alter his friend's perception—to temporarily kill his ego. Before he leaves Mark, for example, he observes him, taking voyeuristic pleasure in the

hallucinatory experience. To Edward it appears that Mark "was experiencing the Good Absolute, the vision of visions, the annihilation of the ego" (1). In this example, Edward mystifies the death of the ego, but his desire to see through the facade of temporal reality into some transcendent place brings about the death of his friend and leads Edward on a journey of death. Yet Edward cannot resist this visionary quest although it has destructive consequences; he explains to his psychiatrist Thomas McCaskerville why he must go in search of his father: "it's a compulsion, I've got to go—and it's to do with death—there'll be a catastrophe, and I'll make it happen" (76).

We find an interesting parallel here between hallucinogens and Christianity. Common jargon for taking acid is "tripping." For example, the evening that Edward gives the drug to Mark there was "no trip for him that evening" (1). Murdoch employs this term in a way which suggests that the drug enduces a journey of the psyche bereft of the ego. This trip finds a parallel in the novel's references to Christian dogma which offers a spiritual path, a way which leads to God. The follower, experiencing nostalgia for the dead Savior, must lose his life in order to save it. Both journeys involve an act of the imagination, wherein belief becomes visionary—that is, the believer envisions the absolute through a figurative death. The parallel between these two mysticisms gets to

the heart of Murdoch's notion of mythical invention. In Edward's character we see how spiritual myths are constructed and how they resemble one another. The novel suggests that death is a common factor in mystical thinking and that death begets death. Existing in some non-place, death takes on the function of a sign, giving meaning to the character's existence.

Stuart: "There are signs everywhere, everything is a sign."

One of Murdoch's favorite mouthpieces for philosophical ideas is the religious atheist—one who knows there is no God but chooses to believe anyway. She generally presents these characters in a favorable light; though not perfect, they are generally less solipsistic than other characters. After leaving the convent, the nun Anna of Nuns and Soldiers, for example, keeps her faith in God although she no longer believes in him. These characters act according to a moral imperative that has no Godly sanction, a philosophy that appears preferable to other anti-moralist positions in Murdoch's novels. This bias, along with Murdoch's statements regarding her own personal beliefs, makes it easy for critics to point to these characters as Murdoch's ethical models. Elizabeth Dipple makes this point in The Unresolvable Plot: "Murdoch insists in novels and interviews that although there is no God, religion must persist on this planet in order for ethical thought to remain part of our human baggage" (202). In The Good

Apprentice Edward's brother Stuart, an atheist who seeks goodness in an ascetic life, speaks for such a notion. He explains his religious views in this way: "something that keeps love of goodness in people's lives, that shows goodness as the most important thing, some sort of spiritual ideal and discipline, like—it's so hard to see it—it's got to be religion without God, without supernatural dogmas, and we may not have time to change what we have into something we can believe in—that's what I think anyway—but I'm just a beginner—" (31).

This comment appears to mark Stuart as the "good apprentice" of the title, as his ethical ideals echo Murdoch's appeal for a more selfless, loving humanity. Yet such a reading overlooks some of the problematics of Stuart's philosophy, as well as the similarity between his quest and Edward's. Espousing "goodness" does not necessarily mean that one achieves or understands it. Stuart believes that goodness can be achieved by giving up the social carapace that comes from living a public life. Instead, he seeks a private life, "a place where he need have no persona" (53). It is only through the death of this persona that he can achieve goodness: "Stuart's 'hedonism' was an instinctive craving for nothingness which was also a desire to be able to love and enjoy and 'touch' everything, to help everything. To this end celibacy and solitude appeared as essential means" (55). Stuart expresses his hedonism through asceticism, in contrast to many of the

characters who seek pleasure in the social realm—in sex, drink and urbane chit-chat. While Stuart's philosophy appears to be more selfless, and therefore more admirable than that of the other characters, like Edward he too is on a visionary quest.

While their spiritual journeys differ, both Edward and Stuart seek salvation in death. Edward dies in order to meet Christ, represented by his father Jesse, while Stuart dies to become Christ. While Edward goes to hell, Stuart experiences a spiritual afflatus wherein he and Christ become interchangeable: "The identification was unanalysed and instinctive, something obvious, where 'not I but Christ' was interchangeable with 'not Christ but I,' experienced sometimes as a transparency and lightness, the closeness, even the easiness of good" (52). Yet both characters look for signs of the absolute through which they will create their own spiritual myths; their interpretations of signs create a narrative of salvation through death. When Edward visits Seegard, his father's home, he enters a mystical world, occupied by supernatural beings—poltergeists and fairies, for example. In this world Edward becomes visionary, seeing signs everywhere. When he has no access to his father, he begins to imagine all kinds of evil motives in the women of the house, his stepmother and two half-sisters. For Edward Seegard is an afterworld where he must struggle to find his father whom he believes is being held prisoner by the women. Water becomes an important

spiritual sign to him as he drowns in his own visions which offer the possibility of baptism, thus salvation from his sins. Edward's uncertainty regarding the events at Seegard and his father's actual condition provide some of the book's most interesting passages, as the reader is also left uncertain of the state of affairs there.

While Edward's interpretation of signs arises from his personal suffering, Stuart looks for signs which speak of the suffering of others. The plaits of the young girls whose hair had been cut before they were gassed in the concentration camps is a sign of suffering that characterizes his religious philosophy; he regards the plaits as "a sort of—particular—absolute thing" (148). Stuart associates victimization with goodness, as evident in the way he views Christ's crucifixion. He tells Thomas that he has to think of Christ "in a certain way, not resurrected,...He has to mean pure affliction, utter loss, innocent suffering, pointless suffering, the deep and awful and irremediable things that happen to people" (147). The suffering that occurs when one dies holds more importance for Stuart than what happens after death. Unlike Edward he seeks signs in the material world, giving spiritual significance to what he perceives as the world's victims. He ruminates to himself, for example: "The mouse. And the spider. Who had talked about the spider? Thomas. Well, the spider mattered too. There are signs everywhere, everything is a sign. There are no ordeals, or else

everything is. And no way, only the end, as somebody told him" (508). Stuart's confusion here indicates his desire to create his own religion out of the fabric of life's painful exigencies, yet he still remains uncertain that signs hold any significance even as he continues to wait for one.

Stuart's immersion in his ascetic life places him outside the social realm of the other characters in a kind of dead zone where he appears to some as a ghost. In this way Stuart becomes a troublesome interloper from the spiritual realm—a transcendental misfit who judges the living—a sign of judgment. Their discomfiture with Stuart's dead presence in the world of the living reveals their attachment to dead others whom they see reflected in the void of Stuart's ascetic philosophy. Out of this void erupt the images of ghosts who profoundly affect the characters' individual dramas. Stuart, then, becomes a sign whose existence disseminates more signs.

Harry: "God is not watching you."

Stuart's father, for example, disgruntled by his son's asceticism, tries to convince him that his philosophy is an "illusion." Harry's discomfiture, however, reflects his own fear of death and the pain he has suffered from the painful loss of family members. After a conversation with Stuart, he looks into a mirror and contemplates mortality: "He thought, Casimir is dead, and Romula is dead, and Stuart's mother is dead, and lovely Chloe who was so very much alive

is dead too, and I shall die" (42). He refers here to his father, mother and his deceased wives respectively. Upon the heels of this thought follows a reference to his "terrible secret"—an image of the drowning of his father in which he sees his "empty boat . . . ghosting along by itself" (42). Stuart's apprenticeship to the good—his death within life—disinters these ghosts from Harry's memory, upsetting the framework of his own personal myth. Although he berates Stuart for his philosophical position, Harry admires him for his courage, while perceiving Stuart's religious views as a judgment of him: "Had he engendered a monster? He was hurt in his secret soul by Stuart's judgment upon himself" (43).

Harry's fear of Stuart's judgment destabilizes the amorality that characterizes the rhetoric of his personal philosophy. A sensualist who makes sexuality his religion, he interprets Stuart's religious position in a sexual way. He tells him, for example, that "Your religious plan is simply a sexual plan, it's sex by other means" (41). We might accuse Harry of the inverse—that his sexual plan is a religious one in that he associates death with sex. His affair with Midge, Thomas's wife, indicates such a connection. During one interlude he tells her he "shall die of love" without her kisses, and in an attempt to soothe her guilt over their affair he tells her to come "Into the deep river" (349). For Harry, this deep river is a petite morte that is necessary for his salvation. He finds in his affair

with Midge a union wherein he loses himself, experiencing his own version of death in life. His mystification of sex arises from the multiple ghosts who populate his psyche and in whom he finds a reflection of his own death. Sex, then, becomes a way of unifying himself with these dead others: the river of sex flows into the distant void uniting him with the dead. When Harry tells Stuart that "God is not watching you," he renounces the notion of transcendent judgment, yet his own fear of death suggests that he feels accused by the ghosts of his past. From his belief in their judgments, he has developed his sensualist philosophy to fend off actual death while experiencing this figurative one.

Midge also fears Stuart's judgment. When she and Harry accidentally end up at Seegard after their car breaks down, she is horrified that Stuart wants to return to the city with them. She accuses Harry of wanting "to have a witness, so as to ruin everything" (295). The "everything" that Midge refers to is not only her secret affair with Harry, but the dream-myth which she has created by trying to become the image of her dead sister Chloe. Midge has always felt dwarfed by the greater image of her sister, who became famous for being a model for and lover of Edward's famous father Jesse Baltram. When she tells Harry, "when I was young she was everything and I was nothing" (88), she expresses the need to fill up an internal void with the totality of her sister's image. As she grows older, for

example, she looks more like Chloe, as evident in the scene at Seegard when Jesse, mistaking her for her sister, passionately kisses her. This incident gives Midge the opportunity to become her sister's stand-in. Later, she dreams of "Jesse coming to her, young again and saying, I love you, marry me. And Midge in the dream would think, and I can [her emphasis], I am young and free, I am not married to anybody" (333).

This dream reveals a hidden motive behind Midge's affair with her sister's former husband Harry. In her involvement with Chloe's lover and husband, she attempts to appropriate her sister's ghost. In her dream she is free of marriage and capable of doing what her sister did not do—marry Jesse Baltram. Her affair with Harry and fantasy about Jesse are dreams, however, which she wants to remain hidden because they would reveal this deception—that she is playing dead. Even though she leads Harry to believe she wants to leave Thomas, she really wants to maintain this secret affair because it constitutes her dream-myth.

Her feeling that Stuart has judged her does bring about the dissolution of the relationship with Harry. After their return from Seegard she has dreams "in which Stuart's white face stared at her accusingly" and "In some dreams, when the pale horseman passed her by, he turned towards her and was Stuart" (333). Feeling accused and guilty, she transfers her affection from Harry to Stuart and thereby from one ghost story to another.

Thomas: "You are dying."

Thomas McCaskerville, in his solipsistic abuse of power, resembles other Murdochian psychiatrists. Abandoning many of the precepts of modern psychiatric methods, he considers himself an "unbeliever." He, in fact, has created his own therapeutic methods, based on the notion that "We practice dying through a continual destruction of our self-images, inspired not by the self-hatred which seems to be within, but by the truth that seems to be without; such suffering is normal, it goes on all the time, it must go on" (82). Thomas' theory supposes the continual loss of self-images as dying becomes a process of shedding layers of the ego, which allows closer access to the unconscious. Thomas finds "a reservoir of spiritual power" in the unconscious which represents an afterlife attained through this psychic dying. Thomas' form of psychiatry, then, is his self-created religion, and as high priest, he plans the salvation of others.

Thomas lives in a dying if not dead world, evident in his fascination with both Edward's and Thomas's spiritual quandries and his desire to assist them in their journeys. He uses his methodology on Edward, for example, to facilitate the young man's descent into hell, telling him that he is undergoing a "spiritual journey" created by defense mechanisms meant to protect his "old egoistic self-image..."(71). He is also the impresario of Edward's journey to Seegard, having written a letter to the Baltrams

to ask them to invite Edward for a visit. In this way, Thomas practices his voodoo psychology on Edward, who is unaware of this intervention. He has a different relationship with Stuart, however, viewing him as "a talisman, a symbol of death" (83). Like other characters, he considers Stuart to be spiritually exalted—a sign of godly presence. Stuart's resistance to Thomas' program of salvation—his refusal to follow, like Edward, the spiritual path prepared for him—makes him a Christ of sorts who has already accomplished Thomas' dying. Fascinated yet threatened, Thomas wants to see "him in trouble" (83)—in other words, he hopes that through suffering Stuart will succumb to the darkness within him (149). Stuart's ascetic death threatens Thomas because it requires none of the fancy psychological rhetoric that characterizes his theory. Further, it eclipses his views by suggesting that one can be good by sacrificing worldly pleasures without succumbing to these "dark powers" of the unconscious. Wondering whether Stuart would succumb to these powers, he admits that "the idea of such a collapse interested him; he was already imagining himself coming to the rescue" (149).

In a voyeuristic, vicarious way Thomas creates his religious myth from others' suffering in an effort to fend off his own personal suffering. This mysticism, however, blinds him to his wife's deception. He has ordered his universe in such a way that he fails to involve himself in the lives of his son and wife. By insulating himself in

this way, he fails to see his wife's deception which, when he discovers it, brings about the suffering he has so avidly avoided. Through this theoretical exercise in which he experiences simulated death, he hopes to avoid actual loss. Yet this defensive maneuver brings about the loss he fears: "It was as if there were a great void where his love for Midge had been, and yet how could that possibly be—it was just that he was suffering in a new and dreadful way, like the invention of a new torture, real suffering, his love transmuted into absolute pain" (423).

Revision: Giving Up The Ghost(s)

"I've got to survive."

By the end of the novel all of the central characters experience a revision of their beliefs. Unlike other Murdochian fantasists who die as a result of their mythical thinking, such as Rupert in A Fairly Honorable Defeat, these characters experience a change of perception which gives them a new and optimistic attitude. The overall myth of the book hinges on this possibility of altering one's beliefs which could be viewed as experiencing a kind of freedom. Changing one's thinking, however, does not presume a place where consciousness exists outside of an ideological framework. On the contrary, The Good Apprentice suggests that to relinquish old myths one must adopt new ones; this idea is a central myth of the novel.

While the quest for salvation is a part of the characters' self-deception, it also leads to a change in perception. Edward's absorption in his Christian myth does not provide him with the answer he is looking for, but it does eventually help him to return from the underworld and to realize "'I've got to survive'" (515). No longer a corpse, he ascends from the darkness: "The mad black fit had passed, leaving ordinary misery behind. I suppose I'll get better, he thought, I suppose I won't always be totally wretched. I must be a bit better if I can even think this" (514). When Edward no longer blames himself for Mark's death, he gives up that ghost and forgives himself. No longer a corpse, he can also give up his attachment to Brownie, Mark's sister, and Jesse, figures who have given significance to his mystical descent into his visionary hell.

His salvation follows a Christian model with the exception that the Christ whom he seeks does not exist in some distant other world but within himself. That which he envisions in the signs and figures of salvation is his own self-reflection. Christ becomes a symbol for the individual, who through suffering dies and is resurrected when the illusion of ghosts is dispelled. In this way, the book adopts Christian mythos to suggest that personal salvation occurs through finding (or inventing) a Savior within oneself. This internal Christ, like the Christian one, must die; when Edward loses himself, by way of

suffering, he returns to the living with a different vision of the world. When Edward sees Jesse's drowned image in the river he sees his own death.

This revision of the Christian myth, then, abolishes the absolute, making salvation something that occurs within the individual without the assistance of transcendent authority. Stuart's atheistic quest for personal goodness reflects such a philosophy, but his apprenticeship proves to be less enlightened than it first appears, for he too experiences a self-revelation which makes him question his non-religion. If suffering is a necessary component of salvation, as the book suggests, then Stuart's asceticism falls short. His desire to help others, to alleviate their suffering, arises from an idea of goodness, rather than a feeling of compassion. Viewing himself as Christ, Stuart wants to help others but distances himself from their actual suffering. He envisions the Good Samaritan in this way: "Stuart pictured the Good Samaritan as being intently reflective at suitable intervals about the man he had helped, so long as he could continue to help him..., but as otherwise dismissing the matter from his mind" (50). Similarly, his attitude toward the dead exemplifies this detachment. Regarding the suicide of a former tutor, he expresses indifference: "It had not, it did not concern him" (50).

Stuart's asceticism, characterized by a withdrawal from suffering, originates in a childhood loss—the death of his

mother. Like other characters, Stuart creates his religion from the grave of a dead other. While his altruism follows Murdoch's moral position on respecting the reality of others, it falls short in this way: he idealizes the suffering of others in order to avoid his own personal suffering; their pain buffers him from his own. His detachment arises from an attachment to his dead mother's image in which he has found refuge from childhood tribulations: "Her mystic form had been a refuge from a thoughtless stepmother and a neglectful father and a brother preferred by both. She knew about love, about how he lacked it" (54). Stuart's death in life, then, is an attempt to appropriate his mother's image of goodness which he has imagined in her angelic ability to love and understand him. Just as she has loved him from a distance, so he loves others.

The harm that Stuart's death-myth inflicts upon others finally brings about his realization that withdrawal from suffering does not exempt one from causing it. His being viewed by Harry and Midge as a sign of judgment, for example, causes the drama of pain which ensues. After a scene with Harry, who accuses Stuart of deeply hurting him (443), he realizes that his ersatz Christhood does not exempt him from doing harm to others. He recognizes that the sanctuary of the church where he has previously meditated has been a "romantic idea" and that his goodness is "a separation not a connection, it's a romantic idea of

myself, as if I imagined I was robed in white" (445). When he discovers "that if I do anything at all I can do evil" he experiences suffering characterized by a "shameful loneliness" which he has fended off with his religion.

Severed from the ghost of his mother, Stuart can truly empathize with Harry's pain, causing him to experience the desolate nature of his own existence. Perceiving the world through this veil of pain, he discovers the sign which he has been seeking. On the railroad station platform he looks down into "the vault beneath the rails" where he had once imagined himself rescuing someone who had fallen into the hole. When he sees a "live mouse" moving about, he realizes that the vault is a place of habitation, not a death trap waiting to engulf a heedless passenger. The mundaneness of the situation constitutes the profundity of Stuart's awakening. Simply, he sees that "It lived there [her emphasis]" (447). Seeing life in this sign rather than death, Stuart experiences a revision of his attitude towards humanity and toward himself. The mouse does not require his Christ-like help but lives and thrives in the void which Stuart had once viewed as a malevolent danger. Seeing his own reflection in the mouse, he no longer takes his image from the ghost of his dead mother and relinquishes his Christly status.

Personal suffering or empathetic suffering, the novel suggests, must be experienced in order to revise the myths impeding the path toward goodness. To be good one must

experience the victimization which is an inherent part of the human condition. By avoiding personal suffering one more easily becomes a victimizer "by default." Stuart and Thomas, for example, by removing themselves from the drama of suffering, heedlessly cause suffering. The book suggests that this careless withdrawal embodies a kind of evil in that it perpetuates needless pain. Like Stuart, Thomas must experience real suffering—losing Midge—before he admits to himself that "I'm a careless gardener" (430). Only through suffering does he realize the potential harm that his therapy could cause to others. Psychoanalysis, he realizes, "could make the most extraordinary mistakes when it left the paths of the obvious. Wild guesses, propelled by the secret wishes of the guesser, could initiate long journeys down wrong tracks" (496). Thomas' death-myth (his psychological theories) changes when he experiences death through the loss of Midge, thus his credo changes from "You are dying" to "I am dying."

When Harry loses Midge he suffers enormously, but to his surprise he does not "die of love . . . He would not fall out of his boat and see it drift away faster than he could swim" (513). The ghosts whom he has fended off through his relationship with Midge no longer threaten him, and his former atheistic claim that "God is not watching" becomes a reality when he realizes that he will not die like his father just because he has lost Midge, his sexual

partner. No absolute judge controls the outcome of his life or the means of his death.

Similarly, during a conversation with Edward, Midge is shaken out of her love stupor for Stuart. Edward tells her, for example, that Stuart "is not part of the thing at all" (469) and "you've invented him" (470). His words allow her to "see the 'event' in a different light," disrupting her death myth and severing her attachment to Chloe's ghost. In this conversation, Edward "appeared here on the side of the ordinary world where absolute choices between life and death did not take place" (486). When Midge relinquishes this notion of choosing between life and death, she lets go of both Stuart's and Chloe's dead images. By transferring her love from Harry to Stuart, she has escaped the double bind of her love for Thomas and Harry: "What had happened had been in effect a means by which she had separated herself from Harry, a light in which she had been appalled [sic] by the last two years" (486). As she explains to Stuart in a letter: "I put it all onto you like an ass's head" (508). When she gives up her love for Stuart she realizes, like Harry, that no judge-in-death is watching her—no Chloe, no God. Subsequently, she can make a choice in life, not between life and death but between Thomas and Harry.

Midge ascribes her reason for choosing Thomas to "chance . . . or something arranged by God" (485). She further suggests that God had something to do with her knowing that she should choose Thomas: "That's what God is

for, to make our lies truth by seeing into the heart. But that's something we can't know" (489). While Midge expresses some uncertainty about God's involvement in her choice, she still believes that telling the truth is good or right. Through Stuart's truth, for example, she sees that the deception of her affair has been wrong. Stuart had not killed her love for Harry but "what he had really killed or maimed was my desire for sex" (489). Sex, then, is revealed as the facade of the larger deception in which Harry and Midge were involved. Sexually they have drowned in the ghosts of family members—a legerdemain concealing the fact that their sex life has been a union with the dead.

As the characters' personal myths find resolution within the novel's framework, a central death-myth of The Good Apprentice emerges. The potential for salvation exists within the self-reflective mirroring of one's own death. The book disclaims the distancing procedure whereby the self reifies dead others by appropriating their ghosts. Hence, there is no distance between consciousness and death, and the myths which arise from such a view create religions and philosophies that perpetuate suffering. "I am dying or I will die," more accurately reflects the troubling awareness of mortality that lies behind mythical invention. That is to say, we deceive ourselves less when we realize that it is our own deaths which we see when we look into the void of non-existence, or when we attempt to speak to the dead. Prayer, for example, is talking to oneself, as when Edward

talks to Mark. In the same way, he hears the echoing of his own voice in the summons at the seance.

Just as there are no ghosts, there is no God. Transcendence and the absolute have no authority except as they have been given significance in myths. Thus, the individual is the author of religion and morals; the difference between good and evil is a singularly human concern, having no spiritual authority. The book, for example, defames Stuart's notion that "religion is the distance between good and evil." Distance presupposes judgement from a supernatural source, as we have seen in Harry and Midge's response to Stuart's asceticism. Again, such a division assumes the existence of some transcendent authority. While religions create their philosophies by discerning the distance between good and evil, the novel suggests that no such distance exists. Both arise from the same contingent well of human consciousness and can only be defined through an evaluation of human suffering. The measure of goodness, for example, hinges on both personal and empathetic suffering, while evil arises from the suffering we inflict upon others, either intentionally or through disregarding their pain. Characters such as Thomas and Stuart perpetrate evil, not willfully, but through distancing themselves from others through the creation of their personal religions.

Murdoch's myth remythologizes death, suggesting that our view of death be revisioned to change our religious

constructs. A better myth would be one which embraces a gulf or void through which pain erupts, bearing the image of our own personal death, not one which distances us from pain by creating spiritual dramas which defer suffering. Yet while the novel undermines the characters' figurative relationships with dead others, it still remains that the novel's myth depends on death for its authority, and that in fact we can find the same authority operating in the novel as genre.

Death In The Novel

I suspect that death in the novel might be a more useful focus for serious discussion of the genre than the death of the novel. What I have in mind is of course not the novelistic rendering of deathbed scenes but how the novel manages to put us in touch with the imponderable implications of human mortality through the very celebration of life implicit in the building of vivid and various fictions. (Alter 244)

The creation of myths as depicted in The Good Apprentice corresponds to the process of invention that determines the novel's design, filling up the void left by death, its form a reflection of that absent, unknowable value. This void, always beyond the reach of the narrative, exists in some distant place where the reflection of ghosts compels and beseeches the author who (in their absence) resurrects them. In this way, the novel is a seance asking the lost dead to speak. The voices of ghosts speak with authority from beyond the grave, mystifying language and making it more meaningful. Their absence, reflected as a metaphysical presence in the text, gives them the stamp of

the absolute, and thus the myth-in-narrative receives godly sanction. From this perspective, death is the master trope of all narratives.

Yet as my interpretation of The Good Apprentice suggests, this death-drama is itself a deception of the inventor. Out of the distant void the novelist communicates with the ghosts of her own invention, imagining the afterlife. Death, then, becomes other, an alterity dividing the self from its non-self, a sign beckoning from the distant beyond. Reaching out to this absent other, the novelist writes her narrative-myth, leaving a last will and testament—a mythical foreshadowing of the author's death, a legacy of duration. In Writing Degree Zero Roland Barthes makes this connection between the novel and death:

The Novel is a Death; it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientated and meaningful time. But this transformation can be accomplished only in full view of society. It is society which imposes the Novel, that is, a complex of signs, as a transcendence and as the History of duration.
(52)

Barthes' polemic argues with Sartre's notion that the novelist can show his reader freedom within the novel's social myth. Barthes' analysis proposes, however, that the modern novel's linearity and historical context are ideologically bound to bourgeois assumptions. Inextricably bound to the social order, the novel kills the possibility of freedom which constitutes a death. My reading of Murdoch's death in the novel proffers a different view—that

the novel's design can produce a reconstruction of belief which has the effect of destabilizing the apparent narrative codes. According to this notion, death as trope can transform our thinking-about-death, as the impossibility of duration is reflected in the signs and design of the narrative's mythological structure.

Many of Murdoch's novels are about death. Bruno's Dream tells the story of a dying man; The Book and the Brotherhood and Nuns and Soldiers begin with the deaths of central characters. Additionally, the notion of death as unselfing reappears as characters experience various kinds of death in life. While Murdoch criticizes the kind of self-obliteration that comes with surrendering one's identity to another, as I have discussed in Chapter Two, Murdoch appears to find virtue in a kind of self-surrender which allows one to value the otherness of the world. In The Unicorn, for example, Effingham, facing death when he slips into a bog, sees the world

as all that was not himself, that object which he had never before seen and upon which he now gazed with the passion of a lover...This then was love, to look and look until one exists no more, this was the love which was the same as death.

(189)

This special vision occasioned by encountering death, Murdoch suggests, is the ideal form of love.

In his critique of Murdoch's existential roots, Ben Obumselu notes that

death as a sort of crucifixion of personal desire is in fact quite close to Sartre's conception of

freedom as rational detachment. Both Murdoch and Sartre are in fact trying to give a realistic context to Plato's image of life outside the Cave. (314)

While there are strains of Platonic idealism in Murdoch's fiction, her characters' visionary glimpses occur infrequently and come in the form of the recognition of personal falsehoods, as I have described in The Good Apprentice. Bruno, for example, having abandoned his wife at the moment of her death in fear that she would curse him for his unfaithfulness, realizes before he dies that she probably wanted to forgive him. In The Book and the Brotherhood Rose and Gerard realize they have found in the death of others "a perfect oblation and satisfaction" (560). I use these examples to suggest that actual death experiences often motivate the kind of self-reflection which brings about Murdoch's characters' personal awakening and renewal.

CONCLUSION LIVING IN MYTH

"The mythical is not something 'extra': we live in myth and symbol all the time." ("Mass" 337)

The majority of this study has shown the harmful effects of mythologizing reality as portrayed in Murdoch's novels. But as the last chapter suggests, one of the dilemmas of humanity is that (outside of death) there is no way out of myth. As much as Murdoch hedges against the notion of the human potential to attain absolute goodness, the ethics of her novels lean toward a spiritual (or religious) vision, if only in the fact that they present us with occasions of human beneficence. While most of her novels show us how truly imperfect human nature is, there always seems to be an underlying suggestion that a transcendent element exists within us exclusive of any external divinity guiding our actions. Numerous critics have noted her interest in Buddhism, and her novels substantiate this idea in the way they romanticize, to some extent, Eastern philosophies.

Her characters who deny worldly pleasures and conform less to social norms are treated more kindly, for example, than those immersed in bourgeois urbanities. Tallis, with his disorderly home and unselfish treatment of his dying

father, is an example of a character whom she treats sympathetically, along with Jenkins in The Book and the Brotherhood, who lives a simple, ascetic life and "dislike[s] muddles, cupidity, lying, exercises of power, the masses of ordinary sinning, because they involved states of mind which he found uncomfortable, such as envy, resentment, remorse or hate" (136). Of course most of her novels describe the saga of characters who fail in their efforts to achieve transcendence or to find truth, but there is also the suggestion that this failure is a fundamental and necessary part of being human. Lorna Sage aptly refers to this failure as "the pursuit of imperfection," describing this concept as follows: "Iris Murdoch has always been interested in those philosophical and theological techniques which practise to know God or the Good by a process of self-defeat, and it's a peculiarly fitting form of intellectual scaffolding, because it involves in-built obsolescence, momentary illuminations (and prolific ones) which in their very nature demand to be discarded" (63).

Jake's comic yet introspective narrative in Under the Net is a fine example of this kind of self-defeat wherein, through a process of discovering his own falsehoods, Jake discards his concepts of reality. While scenarios like this one describe the process of clearing paths which lead nowhere, there is also the sense that the discovery of self-deception is a necessary part of the pursuit of virtue, but not the attainment of it. Revisionary thinking, as I

have discussed it, also occurs in other novels and seems to be the closest thing to Murdoch's freedom, which she has described as modes of reflection. Self-reflection when it involves the character in an analysis of his own selfish motives is admirable, Murdoch suggests, as is the self-reflection which brings about a kind of un-self-consciousness that allows us to experience real love. Murdoch's moral argument, in social terms, might best be summarized in these lines spoken by the narrator of The World Child in praise of the teacher whose earnest attention had saved him: "I suspect that many children are saved by saints and geniuses of this kind. Why are such people not made rich by a grateful society?" (21).

It is difficult to talk about Murdoch without using the kind of moral language that permeates her work. To use terms like goodness, transcendence and freedom already involves the writer in Murdoch's concept of reality, her myth. These ideas, however, as they appear in her novels are not easily definable, as each fictional drama unfolds in its own peculiar way. Granted, many of her characters resemble one another—her power figures, her peripheral characters, her victims—but even so, the representations sometimes prove difficult to distinguish with regard to her moral evaluations. But I consider this difficulty a strength of her work rather than a weakness, an indication that fiction-making may talk about truth without giving it the brand of certainty, the authority of intentions.

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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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